

Paradigmatic Shift in the Concept of ‘Childhood’ in American Juvenile Literature: A Study of Mark Twain’s *Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*

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Abstract

The concept of childhood as a distinct genre in American literature is relatively new than English literature. Though the exact periodization is difficult, the beginnings of childhood as a concept appear in American literature since 1800s onward drawing influences of the philosophical theories of Rousseau and his concept of ‘noble savage’ and his most influential work *Emile*, Locke’s idea of ‘tabula rasa’ and the writings of Blake and Wordsworth with their highly moralising and religion-oriented vision of childhood. If situated within the context of literary movement, children literature proper took form in the Romantic Period commonly called American Renaissance. It was the early nineteenth century literature that being influenced by Puritanism sought to inculcate the moral development of children, and the writers regarded children as apprentices to moral perfection and childhood as time of preparation for adult life. The boys were indoctrinated to practice piety, purity, courage, punctuality, morality and hard work to help them overcome odds in later life. This prototype of ‘gentleman boy’ or ‘good boy’ image in juvenile fiction suffers a setback when Thomas Bailey Aldrich inaugurated a new trend in 1869 with *The Story of A Bad Boy* depicting boys, nine to about fifteen in age, as tough, cruel, amoral, noisy, loyal to his group and intensely adventurous. Mark Twain subscribed to this ‘bad boy’ image and outdid Aldrich with such mastery that it became the hallmark of his writing. The Westward expansion, Industrialism and Regionalism gave rise to an important literary movement in America known as Realism. This change in the character of the country brings the change in theme of literature. The paper under concern intends to show how Twain realistically mirrors such change or shift in concept of Juvenile literature and presents his ‘bad boys’ like Tom and Huck in his fiction.

Keywords: Good boy, bad boy, romanticism, realism, shift, childhood,

The famous French historian Philippe Aries in his highly influential book, *Centuries of Childhood*, published in 1960, argues that childhood as a concept is a recent idea, not realised before 17th century. His extensive study and research on medieval paintings, gravestones, furniture and school records yield such findings that children were perceived as 'mini-adults' who shared the same traditions, games and clothes. In England, John Newberry, considered to be the 'father' of children's literature, wrote in 1744 the first children's book, *A Little Pretty Pocket Book* which officially heralds the beginning of children's literature. Two pioneering thinkers of the period of Enlightenment who moulded the content of children literature with an abiding influence of their philosophy were Jean Jacques Rousseau and John Locke. Locke's theory of 'tabula rasa', expounded in 1960 in his book *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* holds the view that at birth a child's mind is like a blank slate; it is therefore the duty of the adults to inscribe the correct notions and instructions upon it for proper behavioural and moral potency when becoming adults. Rousseau forwarded the idea that the child emerges from the womb with intrinsic goodness. He harped on the need of 'natural' education of children and keeping the child away from the deforming effects of societal institutions. Puritanism stressed the spiritual welfare of children and taught them the outcomes of sin and unholy life. Childhood as locus of divinity, spirituality and innocence again finds expression in the writings of Henry Vaughn, Blake, Lamb and Wordsworth. It can, therefore, be assumed that childhood literature started its bon voyage with primary motive of instruction and emphasis on inculcating moral lessons, innocence and divinity in the mind of children rather than entertainment and imaginative aid.

This trend in the content of children literature made inroads into American juvenile fiction by the 1800s onward. Before it, in 1660 after the arrival of English Puritans during the period from 1630-45 at Massachusetts Bay Colony, Puritan ideals were reflected in the teachings for children. In 1660 Thomas White's *A Little Book for Little Children* set out puritan ideal for children. *Spiritual Milk for Boston Babes*, republished in 1656 is a form of catechism containing 64 questions and answers all relating to religious doctrines, beliefs, morals and manners. During the revolutionary war against British rule, some books like *Mother Goose*, *Goody Two Shoes* and *Robinson Crusoe* with few changes were available for children. In the last half of the 18th century several women writers like Sarah Fielding, Barbould, and Sarah Trimmer entered the domain of children literature with their aim to teach the children through their stories. In the first half of the 19th century Martha Sherwood, an eminent writer, produced 350 books and tracts. While living in India she wrote *The History of Little Henry and His Bearer* in 1814 on her missionary theme. During this period biographies of dead pious children were much liked by children. A collection of such biographies was made by Mary Pilkington under the title *Biography for Girls or Moral and Instructive Examples for the Female sex*. These spiritually improving books up to the First half of 19th Century, i.e. Romantic Period were concerned with the spiritual and moral progress and projected 'good boy' image in juvenile literature.

The second half of 19th century saw the emergence of new literary called realism. Samuel Langhorne Clemens better known as Mark Twain in world of letters shoot to prominence as a realistic writer portraying life as he has seen from close quarters and using

realistic dialects in his novels. Two classes – owner and labour class were created following the industrial expansion. The novelists were aware of the poverty, misery and struggle of the poor children and callous accumulation of wealth by another class. They also deemed it a moral obligation to realistically portray the life in wake of industrialisation and arouse sympathy and a feeling of responsibility toward the labour class. Sentimentality and romanticism were discarded in juvenile fiction and it underwent a reorientation of theme. Children in the newly oriented juvenile literature hailed no longer from aristocratic section; they are culled from common families suffering hard to make both ends meet. Tom is not a child of very well to-do aristocratic family and Huck's father is a labour who spends all pennies on alcohol. Mark Twain is the first American writer who countered the concept of childhood as prevalent in juvenile literature and started writing about misbehaving children of socially unprivileged class in his novels like *Adventure of Tom Sawyer* and *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. He accepted the anti social and mischief –making behaviour of the boys as so called inherent characteristic of the age and at the same time presents the inherent goodness in the boys. He invites the readers to take pleasure in boys who are full of mischief in small matters and justifies it by revealing their kind heartedness in serious matters. Twain changes the very idea in his novels that mischievous behaviour in children is necessarily a sign of wickedness.

Adventures of Tom Sawyer, published in 1875 – 76 and set in a small town along the western frontier on the banks of Mississippi river during 1840s is the exciting adventures of Tom who represents a typical mid 19th century American boy who is mischievous, boisterous, brave, adventurous and good at heart. The story follows the life and adventures of Tom before his attainment of manhood. The story has relevance to the adults too as the adults look back with fond reminiscences on their childhood days through Tom. In his Preface to the first edition, Twain wrote, “Although my book is intended mainly for the entertainment of the boys and girls ...part of my plan has been to pleasantly remind the adults of what they once were themselves, and what they felt and thought”. However, in the grab of simple adventure tale, the narrative satirises and criticises the adult attitudes and conventions, religious hypocrisy, absurdity of human nature and gullibility of man.

Apart from these themes in the apparently simple adventure tale, Twain novels mark a significant breakthrough in the presentation of the concept of childhood. The character of Sid is cast in the mould of the concept of childhood in juvenile literature before Twain. Sid is the typical good boy, insipid, tattletale, moral, rule abiding, prig and afraid of outer world; Sid minds all elders and does everything expected of him. He is very fond of Sunday school, listens to long and tedious biblical speech with patience and memorised them for reward. Tom is presented as a foil to his half brother Tom who holds Twain's new concept of childhood in Juvenile literature. The novel begins dramatically with Aunt Polly frantically calling —“TOM...TOM...TOM” but there is no response from Tom. This disobedience to the elder by the boys was quite unthinkable to the boys of the first half 19th century Juvenile literature. Twain's choice of the name Tom shows the mischievous suggestion of the boy because in popular context the very Tom refers to the mischievous boys. Tom plays tricks on

his aunt, cheats her and takes advantage of her too much love and care for him. He makes nuisance in Sunday school, pinching, pulling hair, sticking pins into other boys. Through Tom, the novelist satirises religion and church and shows how such the minds of the boys are spoiled by forcing them to listen to tedium speeches and memorise them for prize of Bible. No boys except Sid show any interest in Sunday school. Unlike Sid, Tom is the typical bad boy who does not mind his elders, skip school and plays trick on elders. Didactic child is criticised and rascals like Tom and Huck are rewarded hearts. Sid is good boy and loves to go to school but still he is not presented in positive way in the novel. Sid is afraid in matters of life and is afraid of adventures. The novelist shows the lamentable condition of a boy of German parentage who loses his mind and becomes a little better than an idiot after learning too much and memorizing verses of Bible. Twain satirises the false ambition of schools particularly of Sunday school which forces children to memorise Biblical verse in order to make them good and moral without bothering their mental health and dislikes. Huck also typifies Twain's idea of so called bad boy image; he is presented as an outcast, having no home, forced to sleep in lofts or hogsheads, wearing ragged clothes and flouting social norms. Huck has no desire to be civilised; he hates the idea of respectability and deplors the idea of going to school and maintain social etiquettes.

Twain's presentation of Tom and Huck departs from the conventional children writing in their penchant for adventure and daredevil nature in braving the outer world. They sneak out of home at night, become pirates and digs out treasures at night. The duo meets the evil in presence of Injun Joe in graveyard and witnessed the murder of Muff Potter. Such behaviour seemed odd and unsocial in children. It is to be borne in the context of Twain's novels that he permitted and sometimes celebrate the apparently anti- social behaviour in children as a reaction to moral didacticism in earlier writings. Huck is hated by society he belongs to. He steals food and has no pangs of conscience or felt no compunction to live by the rules of society.

The main purpose of Twain in presenting children as apparently anti-social and mischievous is to encounter the readership who got used to good boys images of the boys who are not suitable to face the challenges of life. Twain's boys are mischievous, giddy and harum-scarum but they never meant any real harm. The new juvenile fiction embodies a new philosophy of life through its projection of mischievous children that goodness of heart and responsibility weigh more than mere moral platitudes and self-centred indifference of the so called good boys. As the novel falls under the category of bildungsroman and to some extent picaresque novel, the author unfolds the moral as well as physical growth of the protagonists who start their journey as almost roughish, socially outcast, not liked much by the civilised society and ended up becoming responsible and winning the favour of society. Thus Twain seems to celebrate the mischievous traits in the boys and awarded at the end with his plea for inner goodness at heart. The novel presents more than one occasion for the moral integrity of the boys. The basic goodness of the two boys is revealed in their concern about the fate of Muff Porter whom they held to be innocent and simple. They recalled the things Muff Porter did for them and they felt grateful. In spite of real danger to Tom, he told the truth to the

defence council about the innocence of Muff Porter. Tom's nobility of mind and maturity is seen again when Tom takes Becky's punishment which astonished Becky and won her. Huck has also possesses a strong moral sense and risked his life to save Widow Douglas from mutilation at the hand of Injun Joe. When trapped in cave, Tom shows more sign of maturity; he is no longer behaving mischievously. He protects Becky, tries to encourage and bolster her sagging spirit and himself takes full blame for their predicament. He even shows sympathetic reaction even for evil Injun Joe being trapped in cave. In *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Twain also shows the growing conscience of Huck. He knows it is wrong to be harbouring a runaway slave, but his friendship with Jim makes him defy the law. His appreciation of the ridiculous allows him to go along with the lies and swindles of the King and the Duke, till they seem ready to bring real harm to the Wilks sisters. He himself can tell lies and steal to get food and comfort but his code of boyhood rebels at oppression, injustice and hypocrisy.

Tom and Huck are thus the child characters in American Literature who subverts the prevalent concept of childhood with their mischievous behaviour which camouflages inner goodness, moral consciousness and responsibility. The new children does not accept the society they belong to; they criticised it, point to the shortcomings and hypocrisies that creep into society. They revolt against society by escaping from it. In a sense the new children are outsider to the society to chastise to reform it. Tom ultimately returns to society and becomes a member of make-belief society. Huck is an out and out outsider, he escapes from the confining rules and hypocrisy so that he can be able to criticise the folly of the society.

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