

The Adventures of Tom Sawyer as a Bildungsroman

A “Bildungsroman” is a literary genre that focuses on the psychological, moral, and intellectual growth of a protagonist from youth to adulthood (coming of age). The term comes from the German words ‘Bildung’ (education) and ‘roman’ (novel). A ‘bildungsroman’ relates the growing up or “coming of age” of a sensitive person who goes in search of answers to life's questions with the expectation that these will result in gaining experience of the world. In a ‘bildungsroman’, the goal is maturity, and the protagonist achieves it gradually and with difficulty. The genre often features a main conflict between the main character and society. Typically, the values of society are gradually accepted by the protagonist and he or she is ultimately accepted into society—the protagonist's mistakes and disappointments are over. In some works, the protagonist is able to reach out and help others after having achieved maturity. Henry Fielding’s The History of Tom Jones, a Foundling, Goethe’s Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship, Charles Dickens’s David Copperfield, Charlotte Bronte’s Jane Eyre, Rudyard Kipling’s Kim, D.H. Lawrence’s Sons and Lovers and James Joyce’s The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man are some notable Bildungsromans. Mark Twain’s The Adventures of Tom Sawyer is a Bildungsroman as the novel beautifully underscores the moral, psychological development of the protagonist Tom.

In the Preface of The Adventures of Tom Sawyer Mark Twain says: “My book is for boys and girls but I hope that men and women also will read it. I hope that it will help them to remember pleasantly the days when they were boys and girls, and how they felt and thought and talked, what they believed, and what strange things they sometimes did.” Twain was right. The Adventures of Tom Sawyer appeals to readers of all ages. Young readers are drawn into Tom’s world of antics, excitement and adventures. For older readers, Tom is a type “All American boy” and enjoy reading the humorous and honest accounts of familiar childhood experiences, such as getting in and out of trouble at home and in school, falling in love for the first time, playing imaginative games, undertaking risks and testing independence. Aunt Polly says of Tom:

That boy! I never know what he will do next. And he knows that I do not want to hit him. But I should. And if he does not go to school this afternoon, I must make him work tomorrow. He does not like work. Especially on Saturday, when there is no school, he does not like work. All the other boys will be playing. But I must try to make him a good boy. He is my dead sister’s son, and it is my duty. I must do my duty. (Ch. 1)

Tom is the protagonist of the novel. He lives with his aunt Polly at St. Petersburg, Missouri. He is an active young boy who often finds himself involved in mischief and strange adventures. Clever, imaginative, and rebellious, Tom has the ability to outsmart Aunt Polly, most of his friends, and his teachers. Constantly getting into mischief, Tom plays hooky from school and would rather go swimming than tend to his Sunday school lessons. Blessed with an active imagination, Tom dreams to be a noble robber such as Robin Hood or a pirate. Hungry for attention, Tom is obsessed with appearing noble and obtaining the envy of his peers. He is also sensitive to criticism, especially from Aunt Polly and Becky Thatcher, and he shows throughout the book that he is capable of generosity, thoughtfulness, and bravery. Tom often gets into trouble, but he is honest and genuine, standing in direct contrast to his half-brother Sid, whose goodness is an act. Despite the fact that Tom dislikes sitting in school, books are clearly

an important part of his life, inspiring such games as Robin Hood, pirates, and robbers. The Adventures of Tom Sawyer is about Tom's childhood experiences with his friends and family in the tiny village of St. Petersburg and his personal growth after several important experiences. He is probably best remembered for the incident in which he gets a number of other boys to whitewash his Aunt Polly's fence—an unpleasant task in his eyes—by making the work seem to be extremely absorbing.

Tom Sawyer is a dynamic character. As a mischievous child, initially he envies Huck Finn's carefree lifestyle. But the character attains maturity as the novel proceeds. The child Tom turns out to be a man capable of taking wise decisions in the ending. These moments include Tom's testimony at Muff Potter's trial, his saving of Becky from punishment, and his heroic navigation out of the cave. He moves from enjoyment in the most famous of boyhood games--playing "Indians and Chiefs," pretending to be Robin Hood, and so on--to actions that require a high degree of moral integrity. 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, growing up for Tom means embracing social custom and sacrificing the freedoms of childhood. He deserves our admiration as he decides to break the boyish oath he took and to reveal Injun Joe's guilt in murdering Dr. Robinson--an act that freed an innocent man and placed Tom, himself, in jeopardy. Tom's adventures in the Jackson's Island, his courtship of Becky and his struggle with Injun Joe, which ends with Tom and Huck's discovery of the treasure have unveiled Tom's character. Tom tries to free Jim from captivity.

However, Tom is extremely clever and possesses an incredible insight on human nature. Throughout the novel, Tom must learn to listen to his conscience and become accountable for his actions. His misdeeds are never malicious, and by the novel's end he proves himself capable of mature decision-making and empathy, with a commitment to being a responsible community member.

Considered the epitome of the all-American boy, Tom Sawyer is full of mischief but basically pure-hearted. However, if we view Tom Sawyer as a tale of maturing, a *bildungsroman*. Tom is a well-rounded character, a mix of strengths and flaws, based on trickster and hero archetypes that were adapted in American literature to create a particular type of American male hero. In the tradition of American trickster heroes, Tom survives by his wits, his practicality, and his cheerful, robust ability to dominate others. He loves to be active, rejects book learning, and has a strong spirit of adventure and daring. During the course of the book, he journeys to maturity, gaining wisdom as he faces and overcomes obstacles on his path, including his own mortality. Mark Twain says, "So endeth this chronicle. It being strictly a history of a boy, it must stop here; the story could not go much further without becoming the history of a man."

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