



The Tortoise's Tale

"... we went to school in the sea. The Master was an old turtle-we used to call him Tortoise-"

"Why did you call him Tortoise, if he wasn't one?" Alice asked.

"We called him Tortoise, because he taught us," said the Mock Turtle

Jill P. May, editor

Playing Pirates with Tom Sawyer: The Intersection of Reader-Response Theory and Play Theory

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Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* tells the story of a boy's adventures in a Midwestern American town during the mid-nineteenth century, but it also provides an insightful account of how many children respond to literature. Although Tom is not seen reading over the course of the novel, the depictions of Tom's play provide ample evidence that Tom enjoys reading adventures stories. The novel includes many instances of Tom incorporating elements from stories in his pretend play. The most notable example is when Tom and his friends take a raft to an island located in the middle of the Mississippi River where they pretend to be pirates. Under Tom's direction, the boys assume pirate names and play out scenes from pirate stories.

Tom's response to pirate stories has significant connections to both **reader-response theory** and **play theory**. Although the terms reader-response theory and play theory were not yet coined when Twain published *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* in 1876, Twain's depiction of Tom's playful response to pirate stories anticipated many of the key arguments and observations that these theorists have made concerning children's responses to literature.

Reader-response theory is often traced back to the publication of Louise M. Rosenblatt's *The Literature of Exploration* in 1938, but it was not until the 1970s that it emerged as a separate school of literary criticism (Murfin & Ray 425-429). A central tenet of reader-response theory is that the meaning of a text is not the same for every reader. Reader-response theorists and critics point out that readers bring their own experiences to a text, and these experiences frame their responses to the text. As Roderick McGillis states in *The Nimble Reader: Literary Theory and Children's Literature*, "The main thing is that a reader-based approach to literary study recognizes a fundamental subjectivity in our ways of reading. Each reader interprets texts in ways that are peculiar to this reader" (178).

Many critics in the area of children's literature studies have taken an interest in reader-response theory in part because this critical approach helps explain why children and adults often have such different responses to the same stories. In the view of such critics, these differing responses to stories are not just related to differences in the reading abilities of children and adults. Michael Benton and Geoff Fox, two prominent reader-response theorists, argue that when children read stories, they tend to respond by imagining a secondary world based on elements in the stories. In a



sense, they immerse themselves in the stories, and in the process they enter this secondary world. Their response to the stories is framed within the context of this secondary or imaginary world.

As reader-response theorist Robert Protherough points out in *Developing Response to Fiction*, many children have a tendency to project themselves into the stories that they are reading, and this process is often expressed through their play activities. Children pretend to be characters from their favorite stories, or they act out plot elements, or they imagine that their play is taking place in the settings described in the stories. Protherough argues that child readers describe this "experience as being 'there' in the books with the characters" (22). In their pretend play, these children often deviate from the story line found in the printed version, but they tend to honor the basic literary conventions associated with the story.

Protherough's insights into how children project themselves into stories can be readily applied to Twain's *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. The novel includes many examples of children acting out scenes from stories, but the most fully developed example is the extended passage in which Tom Sawyer pretends to be a pirate. Toward the middle of the book, Tom, Huckleberry Finn, and Joe Harper take a raft to Jackson Island, a small, uninhabited island located in the middle of the Mississippi River, where they act out scenes from pirate stories. It is clear from the text that Tom is very knowledgeable about pirate lore. When Huck asks what pirates do, Tom responds, "Oh they have a bully time—take ships, and burn them, and get money and bury it in awful places in their island where ghosts and things watch it, and kill everybody in the ships—make 'em walk the plank" (130).

With Tom's help, the boys assume pirate names. Huck is renamed Huck Finn the Red-Handed, Joe takes on the name of Joe Harper the Terror of the Seas, and Tom dubs himself the Black Avenger of the Spanish Main. While on Jackson Island, the boys play out several scenes from pirate stories although Tom has to provide direction since his companions are not nearly as well versed in pirate lore as he is.

Lucy Rollin, the editor of the Broadview Edition of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, explains that these pirate stories are based on a series of tales by Ned Buntline that first appeared in a weekly paper called *Flag of Our Union* in 1847 and then came out as a book titled *The Black Avenger, Story of the Spanish Main*. During his boyhood years, Twain read Buntline's pirate stories, and he drew on this aspect of his childhood when he created the character of Tom Sawyer. Twain often described Tom Sawyer as a composite character who is only partially based on himself, but Tom's reading experiences and tastes correspond with Twain's memories of his own childhood reading experiences (Rollin 306).

Like many reader-response theorists, contemporary play theorists are interested in children's playful response to stories. As Brian Sutton-Smith explains in *The Ambiguity of Play*, there are many different types of play. However, the type of play that most directly relates to children's responses to reading is dramatic play or, as it is sometimes called, pretend play. This type of play often involves a narrative element. Through their play, children not only act out stories, but they transform the stories in the process, often taking a collaborative approach in which the child players bargain and compromise as they assign roles and revise plot elements. "What they reproduce," writes Sutton-Smith, "is a playful theatric adaptation" (154).

The collaborative and bargaining process that Sutton-Smith discusses is evident throughout the pirate passages in *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. At one point, for example, Tom Sawyer and his friend Joe Harper start combining the character traits of a hermit with the traits of a pirate (129-130). At another point, the boys fantasize about the fine clothing that pirates wear. This conversation prompts Huck Finn to start worrying that his tattered clothing is not appropriate garb for a pirate. His companions quickly and collectively solve this problem by making changes to their own pirate story:

But the other boys told him the fine clothes would come fast enough, after they should have begun their adventures. They made him understand that his poor rags would do to begin with, though it was customary for wealthy pirates to start with a proper wardrobe. (131)

Twain's depictions of the boys playing pirates perfectly capture the way children incorporate narrative elements in their play. Like real children, Twain's boy characters stay true to the core narrative



elements from established pirate stories, but they revise these elements in order to accommodate one another and to adapt to their current situation.

In other words, Twain has his characters enter a secondary world that is largely defined by the conventions of pirate stories. Like the secondary worlds discussed by reader-response theorists, the secondary world that Twain describes becomes more important to the boys than the real world, at least for the time during which they are engaged in their pretend play. However, while they are playing pirates, they revise and adapt the plot elements from pirate stories, and in so doing they create the sort of "playful theatric adaptation" that Sutton-Smith describes.

The type of dramatic plays that Twain portrays in the pages of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* is also of interest to child psychologists. Jerome and Dorothy Singer are two of the most influential child psychologists to study this topic. In their book *The House of Make-Believe: Children's Play and the Developing Imagination*, they discuss at length the importance of dramatic play in children's psychological and cognitive development. They argue that through this type of dramatic play, children explore social roles, improve their communication skills, and cultivate their imaginations.

The Singers also stress that this type of play contributes to the development literacy among children. By playing in stories, children began to understand and eventually internalize narrative structures. By pretending to be various characters, they began to discern character traits. By speaking for characters, they began to learn about the importance of voice and point of view. As the Singers explain, children's dramatic play contributes to the education of children in multiple ways. Ironically, the teaching approaches used in many schools often discourage children from engaging in dramatic play. Jerome Singer addresses this topic in his book *The Child's World of Make-Believe: Experimental Studies in Imaginative Play*.

Of course, Mark Twain wrote *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* long before the Singers conducted their research on children's dramatic play, but he likely would have agreed with the points that the Singers make regarding the importance of supporting this type of play. Throughout *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, Twain depicts imaginative play in a positive light, while the passages that are set in the town's schoolhouse present schooling in a very negative light. The fact that Twain partially based the passages that deal with the boys pretending to be pirates on his own childhood reading experiences provides additional evidence that Twain valued children's dramatic play.

In many ways, Twain anticipated the arguments and positions taken by contemporary reader-response theorists, play theorists, and child psychologists. The section of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* in which Tom and his friends pretend to be pirates is not just an entertaining passage; it also sheds light on how children read and how they claim ownership of stories through their dramatic play.

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