**Tom Sawyer**

Mischievous but lovable, Tom Sawyer is a fictional character so well known that he has become a folkloric figure. Even those who have not read [*The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*](https://www.enotes.com/topics/tom-sawyer?en_action=content_body_click&en_label=%2Ftopics%2Ftom-sawyer&en_category=internal_campaign) may be familiar with the episodes in which Tom tricks his friends into whitewashing his aunt's fence for him, spies on his own funeral, acts as the surprise witness against Injun Joe at Muff Potter's murder trial, and gets lost in the cave with his beloved Becky Thatcher. Tom's Aunt Polly takes good care of Tom and his half-brother Sid, although often Tom exasperates her when he gets into trouble. He sneaks out his window at night to go on adventures with his friend Huck Finn, believes in superstitions, and yearns to lead what he sees as the exciting life of a pirate or robber. He can't sit still in church or in school and always finds some diversion, such as watching a bug, to make the time pass more quickly. Tom is happiest when he is off having thrilling adventures with his friends: searching for buried treasure, running away for a few days to a sandbar in the Mississippi River in a game of pirates, or hiding in the cemetery at midnight. He adores Becky Thatcher, the new girl in town, and shows off to get her attention. Tom is a boy of strong emotions and great imagination, and in spite of his mischievous ways he has a good heart: his rescues of Becky when she is heading for trouble with the schoolmaster and of Muff Potter when he is on trial for murder show that Tom knows the right thing to do.

Tom Sawyer is a trickster figure who challenges the rules of conventional society. He and his younger half-brother Sid are wards of their highly conventional Aunt Polly, and Tom engages in a variety of ruses to escape from the impositions of adult society, particularly work and school. Although Sid cleverly sees through Tom's antics, his aunt is more easily fooled. Secretly indulgent of Tom's faults, she nonetheless punishes him dutifully when she discovers his deceptions.

Tom lives in a world defined by the customs and values of boys. He defends his territory, testing newcomers in fights, and participates in ritual exchanges of valueless, even repugnant, goods such as the dead cat he acquires from Huck. Bored by the solemnity of church, he disrupts the service with a pinchbug and trades to get tickets meant to be earned by memorizing Scripture. Subject to childhood romance, he falls in love with Becky Thatcher, a judge's daughter. His attempts to gain her approval, along with his general desire to be the center of attention, inspire him to show off unabashedly. Ultimately, however, he assumes a hero's role, first taking the blame when Becky accidentally damages the schoolmaster's anatomy book, then rescuing her from the cave.

Huckleberry Finn appears in this book as a secondary character. Like Tom, Huck has lost a parent; unlike Tom, he lives a homeless life, sleeping at an old slaughterhouse. Further removed from social convention, Huck shares Tom's enjoyment of pranks and sharp dealing while lacking Tom's regard for respectability. At the end of the novel Tom demands that Huck accept "civilization" in order to remain a member of his gang, which he governs according to rules he interprets from adventure books.

The boys' world is haunted by superstition and governed by biblical injunctions. When they visit the graveyard, they fear ghosts and devils, but they encounter Injun Joe, Muff Potter, and Dr. Robinson robbing a grave. Joe plays the role of a melodramatic villain, killing the doctor and blaming the murder on the alcoholic Muff. Although ignorant enough of conventional Christian history to identify the first disciples as "David and Goliath," Tom and Huck are so conditioned by conventional morality that they expect Joe to be struck down by lightning for his lie. When he is not, the boys assume he has sold himself to the devil. Indeed, he is a demonic character seeking revenge against ordered society.

Tom and Huck run away with another boy, Joe Harper, to escape from the murder they have witnessed. They live in freedom on Jackson's Island, enjoying boyish adventures until conscience intrudes. Their imaginations governed both by books and standard morality, they want to be pirates without violating the Biblical injunction against theft, and Tom feels guilty about the innocent Muff Potter's arrest. Presumed dead, the boys enjoy the center of the town's attention when they return for their own funeral. This return suggests a pattern of death and resurrection, retreat from society and reunion. Tom's return marks a greater sense of responsibility when, racked by conscience, he reveals what he knows of the murder.

Adventure now becomes a reality for the boys as they discover that Joe has hidden a fortune and is plotting revenge against the Widow Douglas. The treasure hunt and Tom's romance with Becky merge in a mazelike cave where Tom and Becky get lost and find Injun Joe hiding out with his stolen money. While Joe dies in the cave, sealed in by unwitting townspeople, Tom and Becky emerge to community recognition, and Tom and Huck share in the treasure retrieved from the cave.

Early in the novel, Tom gives little thought as to the consequences of his actions and is often reprimanded by Aunt Polly for his thoughtlessness and selfishness. He is fundamentally good-hearted, however. As the novel progresses, he undergoes a moral growth and begins to consider others more and to try to do what is right, rather than simply what is fun.