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HUMOR, SATIRE, AND IRONY AS DOMINANT STYLISTIC FEATURES OF MARK TWAIN'S THE ADVENTURES OF TOM SAWYER

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Abstract. This article examines humor, satire, and irony as the dominant stylistic features of Mark Twain's The Adventures of Tom Sawyer (1876). Following the IMRAD format, sixteen comic episodes were purposively sampled from the novel and coded with Raskin's script-opposition theory of humor, Booth's concept of stable irony, and Simpson's discourse model of satire. Irony occurs in 15 of the 16 episodes and satire in 14. Satire targets chiefly religious formalism, schooling, adult hypocrisy, and public sentimentality. It is predominantly gentle (Horatian) and turns sharp (Juvenalian) in only three episodes. The three modes form a layered system: humor supplies the mechanism, irony the narrative stance, and satire the evaluative target. Their combination produces a "double vision" in which a boy's perspective and an adult narrator's ironic distance coexist.

Keywords: Mark Twain; The Adventures of Tom Sawyer; humor; satire; irony; stylistic device; script opposition; mock-heroic; narrator.

Introduction.

Humor, satire, and irony are not ornaments in The Adventures of Tom Sawyer; they are the novel's governing stylistic system. Published in 1876, the book reached its 150th anniversary in 2026, and the Mark Twain Circle marked the occasion by inviting a fresh reassessment of it (Mark Twain Studies, 2025). The anniversary is a fitting moment to ask how Twain's comedy actually works at the level of style.

Twain announced a double audience in his Preface. The book was meant mainly for boys and girls, yet part of his plan was "to pleasantly remind adults of what they once were themselves" (Twain, 1876/2004). This dual address is the root of the novel's comic method. The boy experiences events seriously; the adult narrator presents them with amused distance.

Early readers took the novel as an idyll of boyhood. From the 1960s onward, critics such as Hill (1961), Fetterley (1971), and Robinson (1984) exposed darker layers beneath that idyll. Fetterley described Tom as a "sanctioned rebel" whose revolts the community secretly licenses. Cox (1966) argued that humor was both Twain's gift and his "fate", a mode that shaped what he could say. Lynn (1959) and Rourke (1931) placed his comedy within the tradition of American frontier and Southwestern humor.

This scholarship is rich, but it tends to treat the three comic modes thematically and separately. Humor is linked to nostalgia, satire to social criticism, and irony to the narrator's voice. Few studies code humor, irony, and satire jointly, episode by episode, with explicit stylistic categories. In Uzbek English philology, the novel is often read through translation or plot themes rather than through systematic stylistic analysis (cf. Galperin, 1977; Arnold, 2002).

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The present article addresses this gap. Its aim is to describe how humor, satire, and irony operate as dominant and interdependent stylistic features of the novel. It asks four research questions:

1. **RQ1.** Which humor techniques dominate the comic episodes of the novel?
2. **RQ2.** Which types of irony occur, and how does the narrator signal them?
3. **RQ3.** What targets does the satire attack, and with what intensity?
4. **RQ4.** How do the three modes interact to produce the novel's characteristic tone?

Three working definitions guide the study. Humor is the perception of incongruity between two overlapping but opposed scripts (Raskin, 1985). Irony is a gap between what is said or expected and what is meant or happens; it is "stable" when the reader can reconstruct a fixed intended meaning (Booth, 1974). Satire is the ridicule of vice or folly with an implicit corrective aim; it ranges from gentle, Horatian mockery to harsh, Juvenalian attack (Highet, 1962; Simpson, 2003).

Materials and Methods. Material. The corpus is the full text of The Adventures of Tom Sawyer: the Preface, 35 chapters, and the Conclusion. Quotations follow the Project Gutenberg edition, eBook #74 (Twain, 1876/2004), and were checked against the Gutenberg part-files that divide the novel by chapter. References give chapter numbers so that any edition can be used.

Sampling. Sixteen episodes (E1–E16) were selected purposively. An episode qualified when a comic incongruity was sustained for at least one paragraph and could be bounded as a scene. The sample was spread across the whole novel, from Chapter 1 to Chapter 35, so that the opening, middle, and closing phases are all represented. Episodes of pure suspense, such as the graveyard murder and the cave, were excluded because their dominant effect is not comic.

Analytical framework. Each episode was coded on three levels, one per mode:

Level	Question asked	Categories	Theoretical basis
1. Humor	What mechanism produces the comic incongruity?	trickster or situational reversal; mock-heroic and parody; slapstick; dialect comedy; bathos (anticlimax); caricature; hyperbole and invective	Raskin (1985); Attardo & Raskin (1991); Bergson (1911)
2. Irony	What kind of gap between said and meant, or expected and actual, is foregrounded?	verbal; situational; dramatic; none	Booth (1974); Hutcheon (1994); Galperin (1977)
3. Satire	Is a social vice or folly ridiculed? If so, what is the target and how harsh is the attack?	target domain; intensity: gentle (Horatian) or sharp (Juvenalian)	Highet (1962); Simpson (2003)

Procedure. Analysis combined close reading with stylistic description in the tradition of Leech and Short (2007). For every episode, the opposed scripts were first identified, as Raskin's theory requires. The irony was then classified by Booth's markers: a clash with known facts, a clash of style, or a clash with the reader's superior knowledge. Finally, the satirical target was named and its intensity judged. A Juvenalian rating required explicit narratorial condemnation, such as invective or a direct moral verdict. Where an episode showed several types, the most salient was recorded as primary.

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Status of the counts**.** All frequencies in Section 3 describe the 16-episode sample, not the whole novel. They show the relative weight of devices within comic scenes and are not inferential statistics. The coding was carried out by a single analyst; this limitation is discussed in Section 4.5.

Results. Humor is present in all 16 episodes, as the sampling required; irony occurs in 15 and satire in 14. Every satiric episode is also ironic, while two episodes are comic without any satirical target.

Overview of the coded episodes

Table 1.

Coding of the 16 comic episodes

No.	Episode	Ch.	Humor technique	Irony (primary)	Satirical target	Satire intensity
E1	Aunt Polly's spectacles and the jam trick	1	Trickster reversal	Verbal	Adult authority	Gentle
E2	Whitewashing the fence	2	Situational reversal	Situational	Commerce and desire	Gentle
E3	The Sunday-school Bible prize	4	Bathos	Dramatic	Religious formalism; social display	Gentle
E4	Hymn, prayer, sermon and the pinchbug	5	Slapstick; parodic catalogue	Situational	Church ritual; Calvinist doctrine	Sharp
E5	Willie Mufferson, the "Model Boy"	5	Caricature	Verbal	Conformity	Gentle
E6	Wart cures and the dead cat	6	Dialect comedy	—	—	—
E7	Tom and Becky's "engagement"	7	Parody of courtship	Dramatic	—	—
E8	Tom's self-pity and the pirate names	8, 13	Mock-heroic	Verbal	Romantic adventure fiction	Gentle
E9	The Pain-killer and the cat	12	Slapstick	Verbal	Health fads; adult authority	Gentle
E10	The boys attend their own funeral	17	Situational reversal	Dramatic	Sentimental mourning	Gentle
E11	Tom's prophetic "dream"	18	Trickster reversal	Dramatic	Adult credulity	Gentle
E12	Becky's torn book and Tom's sacrifice	20	Mock-heroic	Situational	Schooling and the rod	Gentle
E13	Examination Evening	21	Parody; slapstick	Verbal	Schooling; genteel	Sharp

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No.	Episode	Ch.	Humor technique	Irony (primary)	Satirical target	Satire intensity
					moralizing	
E14	Cadets of Temperance and the revival	22	Situational reversal	Situational	Moral reform; revivalism	Gentle
E15	The petition for Injun Joe's pardon	33	Hyperbole and invective	Verbal	Public sentimentality	Sharp
E16	Huck under the Widow Douglas	35	Dialect comedy	Situational	Respectability	Gentle

Humor techniques (RQ1)

Reversal is the dominant humor technique: five of the 16 episodes turn on a plan or expectation that flips into its opposite.

Table 2. Humor techniques in the sample

Technique	Episodes	n	Example of script opposition
Trickster or situational reversal	E1, E2, E10, E11, E14	5	punishment vs. privilege (E2)
Mock-heroic and parody	E7, E8, E12, E13	4	heroic vs. trivial (E8)
Slapstick	E4, E9	2	solemn vs. bodily (E4)
Dialect comedy	E6, E16	2	learned vs. folk logic (E6)
Bathos (anticlimax)	E3	1	erudition vs. ignorance (E3)
Caricature	E5	1	virtue vs. display (E5)
Hyperbole and invective	E15	1	mercy vs. folly (E15)

The fence episode (E2) is the model of reversal. Tom turns a punishment into a privilege that other boys pay to share. The narrator then inflates the trick into a mock law: "He had discovered a great law of human action, without knowing it" (Ch. 2). He adds a pseudo-definition: "Work consists of whatever a body is obliged to do, and that Play consists of whatever a body is not obliged to do." The joke then widens to wealthy English gentlemen who pay to drive passenger-coaches, turning a boy's ruse into social comment.

Mock-heroic elevation applies a high register to trivial matter. On Jackson's Island the runaways become "Tom Sawyer, the Black Avenger of the Spanish Main", "Huck Finn the Red-Handed, and Joe Harper the Terror of the Seas" (Ch. 13). After Tom takes Becky's whipping, she exclaims, "Tom, how COULD you be so noble!" (Ch. 20); the capitals mark melodramatic emphasis.

Bathos punctures ceremony. In Chapter 4, Tom has acquired the prize Bible by trading for tickets rather than memorizing verses. Asked to name the first two disciples, he answers "David and Goliah!" The narrator closes the scene: "Let us draw the curtain of charity over the rest of the scene." Slapstick works the same way physically: a pinchbug and a poodle wreck a sermon (Ch. 5), and Tom doses the cat with Aunt Polly's Pain-killer (Ch. 12). Dialect comedy carries Huck's protest against respectability:

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"The widder eats by a bell; she goes to bed by a bell; she gits up by a bell" (Ch. 35). The anaphora of "by a bell" turns grammar into a picture of routine.

Types of irony and their markers (RQ2)

Verbal irony is the most frequent type (6 of 16), and it is signaled by recurrent stylistic markers.

Table 3. Types of irony in the sample

Type	Episodes	n	Typical marker
Verbal	E1, E5, E8, E9, E13, E15	6	deflating word after a dash; mock praise; deadpan reply
Situational	E2, E4, E12, E14, E16	5	outcome reverses the character's intention
Dramatic	E3, E7, E10, E11	4	reader knows what the characters do not
None	E6	1	—

Three markers recur in the verbal irony. The first is a deflating word after a dash. The Model Boy's white handkerchief hangs out of his pocket, "as usual on Sundays—accidentally" (Ch. 5); the last word exposes vanity as calculation. The second is mock praise through inflated diction. Aunt Polly's spectacles are "her state pair, the pride of her heart, and were built for 'style,' not service" (Ch. 1). The third is the deadpan reply. Tom says he gave the cat the Pain-killer "out of pity for him—because he hadn't any aunt" (Ch. 12). His aunt calls him a "numskull", yet the reader sees the point: the "treatment" she forces on him is as cruel as his on the cat.

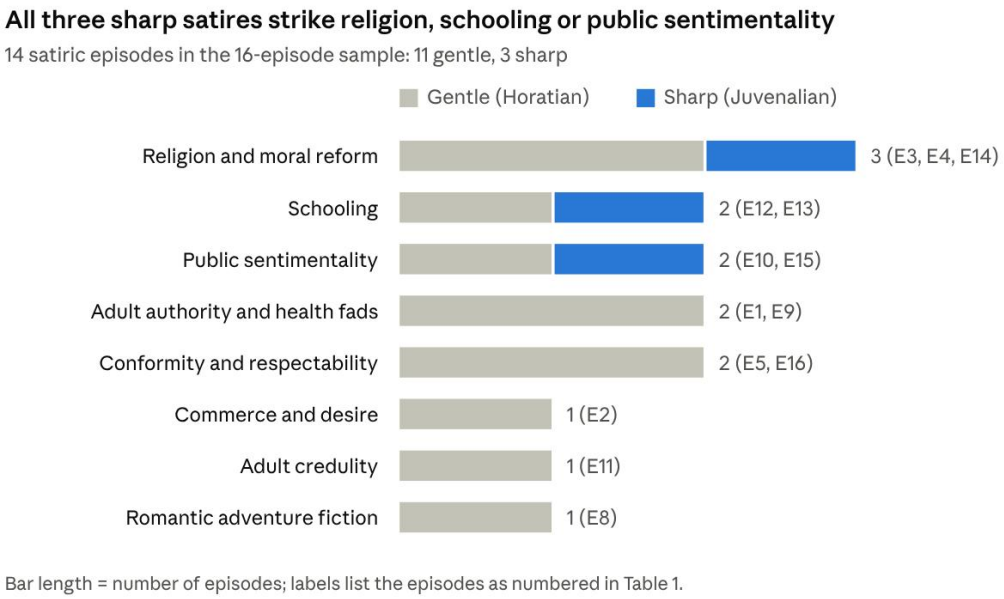
Situational irony reverses intention. Tom learns that "to promise not to do a thing is the surest way in the world" to want to do it (Ch. 22). He joins the Cadets of Temperance for their regalia and waits for Judge Frazer, "apparently on his deathbed", to provide a funeral parade. When the judge recovers, Tom resigns; that same night the judge relapses and dies.

Dramatic irony depends on the reader's superior knowledge. At the boys' funeral, the clergyman "drew such pictures of the graces, the winning ways, and the rare promise of the lost lads" that mourners regret their earlier severity (Ch. 17). The reader knows the boys are hiding in the gallery. When they march in, Tom "confessed in his heart that this was the proudest moment of his life." In Chapter 18, Tom recounts as a "dream" what he actually overheard. Aunt Polly, convinced of prophecy, declares: "Sereny Harper shall know of this before I'm an hour older."

Satirical targets and intensity (RQ3)

Satire is mostly gentle: 11 of the 14 satiric episodes are Horatian, and only three are sharp. Figure 1 shows where the targets fall.

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Coded sample, Table 1 · 14 satiric episodes of 16

Figure 1. Satirical targets in the 14 satiric episodes, by intensity.

Gentle satire mocks vanity without condemning it. In the Sunday school, the superintendent Mr. Walters "fell to 'showing off,' with all sorts of official bustlings and activities" (Ch. 4). The phrase "showing off" is then repeated for group after group until the visiting judge himself "warmed himself in the sun of his own grandeur". The repetition turns a pious assembly into a contest of display, in which Tom is simply the boldest competitor.

Sharp satire appears only three times, and each time the narrator abandons amused distance for a verdict. The minister's sermon "thinned the predestined elect down to a company so small as to be hardly worth the saving" (Ch. 5). At Examination Evening, each composition must "squirm it into some aspect or other" fit for moral edification. The sermon ending the most frivolous girl's essay is always "the longest and the most relentlessly pious" (Ch. 21). The harshest passage concerns the petition to pardon Injun Joe (Ch. 33). A "committee of sappy women" was to beg the governor "to be a merciful ass and trample his duty under foot." The narrator adds "but what of that?" and mocks the tears of signers' "permanently impaired and leaky water-works." Here invective replaces irony as the dominant device.

Discussion. The results show that humor, irony, and satire in Tom Sawyer are not three parallel devices but three layers of one system.

A layered system (RQ4)

Each mode does a different job:

Layer	Function	What it answers	Evidence in the sample
Humor	mechanism	How is the incongruity produced?	present in 16 of 16 episodes
Irony	stance	How does the narrator signal the gap between appearance and	present in 15 of 16

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Layer	Function	What it answers	Evidence in the sample
		reality?	
Satire	evaluation	Who or what is judged by that gap?	present in 14 of 16, always together with irony

The key finding is that satire never appears without irony in the sample. Irony is the vehicle that carries satire to its target, while humor cushions the blow. This agrees with Hutcheon's (1994) view that irony always has an evaluative "edge". It also explains the novel's prevailing gentleness: as long as the judgment is delivered ironically, the reader is invited to laugh rather than condemn.

The three sharp episodes confirm the pattern from the other side. In the petition passage (E15), irony gives way to open invective ("merciful ass", "leaky water-works"). As the ironic cushion thins, the satire hardens. Within this sample, then, satirical harshness rises as ironic indirection falls.

Bergson's (1911) theory of the comic helps to explain the choice of targets. For Bergson, we laugh at the mechanical encrusted upon the living. The Sunday school (E3), the sermon (E4), and the examination compositions (E13) are all rituals that repeat a form after its meaning has gone. Twain's comedy exposes this rigidity, and his irony names its cause: display, as in "showing off", in place of faith or learning.

The narrator's double vision

The Preface's double address to children and adults is realized stylistically through dramatic and verbal irony. The boy's view is reported seriously; the adult narrator's comments undercut it. In the funeral scene (E10), Tom's "proudest moment" is genuine for him, but the reader also sees a community rewriting its memory of two "bad" boys into saints.

The same double vision makes Tom both an instrument and a target of satire. He exposes the adults' "showing off" in the Sunday school, yet he is the greatest show-off of all. This supports Fetterley's (1971) reading of Tom as a "sanctioned rebel": the town tolerates his revolts because they share its own values of display and glory. Robinson's (1984) notion of communal bad faith fits the funeral and petition episodes well. In both, sentiment allows the town to avoid seeing what it has done or what it is doing.

Satire and Twain's development

The dominance of gentle satire (11 of 14 episodes) supports Cox's (1966) argument that humor gave Twain a way to criticize without fully committing to moral attack. Yet the three sharp episodes are not random. All three strike institutions that produce moral language: the pulpit, the school, and the public petition. Twain's harshest satire in the novel is aimed less at sin than at pious rhetoric emptied of substance. This anticipates the sharper satire of Adventures of Huckleberry Finn (1885), where the same targets return without the protection of nostalgia. In this sense, the darker undercurrents identified by Hill (1961) and Fetterley (1971) are already visible at the level of style.

Implications for translation and teaching

Several irony markers identified here are fragile in translation. The deflating word after a dash ("—accidentally"), capitals of emphasis ("COULD"), dialect spellings ("widder", "gits"), and the malapropism "Goliah" all carry evaluative meaning through form. A translation into Uzbek or Russian that normalizes them risks keeping the plot while losing the irony. For teaching stylistics, the three-level coding scheme in Section 2 can serve as a classroom tool. Students can apply it to new episodes and compare their codings.

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Limitations

The study has three main limitations. First, the 16 episodes were selected purposively, so the frequencies describe comic scenes rather than the whole novel. Second, the coding was done by one analyst, and no inter-rater reliability was measured. Third, assigning one primary category per episode simplifies scenes where several devices overlap. Future work could annotate all 35 chapters with two independent coders and report agreement statistics such as Cohen's kappa. It could also compare the original with its Uzbek translation, or with Huckleberry Finn.

Conclusion. Humor, satire, and irony are the dominant stylistic features of The Adventures of Tom Sawyer because they work as one layered system rather than as separate devices. The four research questions can be answered briefly:

Humor (RQ1). Reversal is the leading technique (5 of 16 episodes), followed by mock-heroic elevation and parody (4). Slapstick, dialect comedy, bathos, caricature, and invective complete the repertoire.

Irony (RQ2). Verbal irony is most frequent (6), followed by situational (5) and dramatic irony (4). The narrator signals verbal irony through a deflating word after a dash, mock praise in inflated diction, and characters' deadpan replies.

Satire (RQ3). Satire appears in 14 of 16 episodes and targets religious formalism, schooling, adult authority, conformity, and public sentimentality. It is mostly gentle (11 episodes); the three sharp attacks all strike institutions that produce moral rhetoric.

Interaction (RQ4). Humor supplies the mechanism, irony the stance, and satire the evaluation. Satire never occurs without irony in the sample, and it hardens where ironic indirection gives way to invective.

The resulting "double vision" lets the novel speak to children as an adventure and to adults as a critique of their own pieties. As the Conclusion of the novel says, the book is "strictly a history of a BOY" (Twain, 1876/2004); its style, however, is the history of the adults who watch him. For students of English stylistics, the episode-coding scheme offered here gives a practical way to identify and describe these features in Twain and in other comic fiction.

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