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FROM BAD BOY TO GOOD OL' BOY: LITERARY ORIGINS OF THE SOUTH'S NOTORIOUS FIGURE

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English

Mark Twain is credited with creating the term “bad boy” in boys’ literature from 1865 (Murray 75). His *Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876) subsequently ignited the “bad boy boom” (Kidd 75). Though *Tom Sawyer* was not a best-seller until the twentieth century, the novel has come to represent the quintessential boys’ book of the American nineteenth century (Parille 2-6). Although it has been 135 years since *Tom Sawyer* was published, I argue that the concept of the bad boy continues in contemporary literature, specifically Willie Morris’ *Good Old Boy* (1971), although the bad boy has morphed into the concept of the “good-ol’ boy.” This concept is not limited to children’s literature, however; the “good ol’ boy” has become a fixture in Southern culture. Though Morris indicated in several interviews that his writing was inspired by Twain, little critical research takes up Morris as an author and practically none draws connections between the works of Morris and Twain. Here, I trace the evolution of the bad boy in American literature from Twain’s *Tom Sawyer* to Morris’ *Good Old Boy*, noting that in Southern culture, the “bad boy” morphs into the “good old boy,” – also known as the “good ol’ boy” – a concept rooted in nostalgia that has moved beyond the genre of children’s literature and has infiltrated Southern identity.

In Twain’s *Tom Sawyer* the first time the reader sees the title character, he is literally caught with his hand in his Aunt Polly’s jam jar. Tom is being raised by his aunt,

and Aunt Polly reveals that Tom is full of mischief and pranks; in short, “he’s full of the Old Scratch” (Twain 12). As evidence of his mischievousness, Tom spends the remainder of the day playing hooky from school. He almost gets away with it until his brother, Sid, snitches on him. As punishment Tom must whitewash Aunt Polly’s fence, but the neighborhood boys pay Tom for the experience of doing it. The episodic novel continues with Tom befriending Huckleberry Finn, the motherless son of the town drunk. Tom and Huck enjoy various escapades together, but perhaps the most critically discussed is their adventure with Joe Harper to Jackson’s Island to become pirates.

Tom Sawyer is Twain’s first single-authored book, deviating from his previous journalistic travel books. Twain originally wrote *Tom Sawyer* for adults, but William Dean Howells, Twain’s friend and the editor of *Atlantic Monthly*, convinced him that the finished novel was children’s literature (Messent 66). Adult literature, though, is what many keen children readers had been reading prior to the mid-nineteenth century when books for children were primarily, if not exclusively, didactic.

Following the publication of Twain’s *Tom Sawyer*, bad boy children’s literature began to solidify as a specific genre and take on distinct conventions, as outlined by Beverly Lyon Clark. These conventions include implication of middle class norms and a retreat from adult experience. Bad boy stories tend to be episodic rather than linear, and they tend to depict the state of boyhood rather than a boy’s maturation process (Clark 96). While the bad boy possesses a great deal of pluck and continuously gets himself (and others) into trouble, neither is he mean nor is he a bully.

In *Love and Death in the American Novel*, Leslie Fiedler explains the difference between the “good bad boy” – the types of characters seen in *Tom Sawyer* – and the “good, good boy.” Fiedler convincingly argues that “the Good Bad Boy is, of course, America’s vision of itself, crude and unruly in its beginnings, but endowed by his creator with an instinctive sense of what is right” (270). Conversely, the opposite of the good bad boy is the “good, good boy,” a stock character who has not enough characteristics to be interesting and typically succumbs to some natural element, that, had he been more robust – like the “good bad boy” – he would have survived. Unlike the “good bad boys,” these “good, good boys” are *not* real representations of American boyhood, and the implication is that they will not grow into productive American men, whereas mischievous characters like Twain’s Tom Sawyer are successfully preparing for manhood.

According to the 2005 edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the phrase “good ol’ boy” was first used in 1948 and refers to “a white male of the rural Southern United States regarded as exemplifying traditional southern values; an uncomplicated easy-going man; a ‘man’s man.’” This definition of “good ol’ boy” is similar to definitions of boyhood groups seen in boys’ books prior to, and following, *Tom Sawyer*. As the OED’s definition acknowledges, the concept of the “good ol’ boy” that has come to proliferate contemporary Southern culture represents a man who “exemplif[ies] traditional southern values.” Here seems to be the idea that the “good ol’ boy” adheres to conventions of the old South, and so, a “good ol’ boy” would be one

who adheres to social conventions of an earlier time – what seems to be a form of nostalgia.¹

Twain's *Tom Sawyer* solidifies the American bad boy figure, which continues to appear in contemporary fiction. Many of the bad boy tale conventions are found in Willie Morris' novel, *Good Old Boy*. Morris noted that his writing, especially in *North Toward Home*, has been compared to that of Mark Twain, and he also indicated that Twain's *Roughing It* and *Life on the Mississippi* were influential (Morris and Bales 6, 4). It should come as no surprise that both bad boy tales – *Tom Sawyer* and *Good Old Boy* – share conventions of the genre, thereby linking the bad boy and the good old boy. The title of Morris' novel marks a transition in the evolution of the bad boy. While both novels contain characteristics of the bad boy tale, Morris titles his novel *Good Old Boy*. Recalling Fiedler's assertion that the "bad boy" is a truncated version of the "good bad boy," then Morris' novel changes the phrasing. Both novels describe the plucky boy without ill intentions, but in the 100+ years following *Tom Sawyer's* publication, it seems as though the "good" which Fiedler suggested was superfluous needed resurrecting. Perhaps this is because plucky boys in Morris' day needed the adjective "good" to distract from their actions, as if the "good" was a reminder that the boys' actions were socially acceptable.

Morris' fictional autobiography, *Good Old Boy*, is a boy's coming-of-age tale filled with hyperbolic adventures, such as encounters with Indians of the Clark Mansion. Morris emphasizes his idyllic boyhood, full of mischievous pranks similar to those in *Tom Sawyer*, and his book takes up the concept of the innovative, creative, mischievous child – what Twain terms a bad boy – only Morris renames this type of character the "good old boy." As familiar as Morris was with Twain's work, and as indebted as he was to Twain for inspiration, it is completely feasible when Morris titled his novel that he was aware of Twain's reference to "good old boys" in the 1874 short story "Some Learned Fables, for Good Old Boys and Girls."

A section of *Tom Sawyer* that seems to have inspired Morris is when Tom and Huck go on a treasure hunt. The boys decide that a haunted house is the perfect hiding place for buried treasure, only their adventure is interrupted by two men, one of whom is Injun Joe. The boys watch as the two men unearth gold from the floor, but Injun Joe discovers the boys' tools, and Tom and Huck barely escape being caught and, to their chagrin, Injun Joe takes the gold with him. There is a similar occurrence in Morris' *Good Old Boy*, though Morris' novel includes eight-and-a-half-foot-tall tattooing Indians in the Clark Mansion. After trekking several miles Willie and his friends arrive at the forbidden, mysterious Clark Mansion. At the exact moment of climax, the protagonist's cohorts appear – through the floorboards, no less – wielding an antique gun, a tomahawk, and a baseball bat. Together, these two scenes demonstrate bad boy conventions. In both *Tom Sawyer* and *Good Old Boy*, the boy adventurers are plucky: Tom and Huck for hunting treasure in the haunted mansion, and Willie and his friends for trekking to the Clark Mansion in the first place. These boys' adventures highlight their courageousness and stem from their unassuming natures, and, in the case of *Good Old Boy*, their altruism.

Bad boy literature and the concept of “the good ol’ boy” parallel each other as they begin to permeate Southern popular culture. One of the best examples of this phenomenon is the television show *The Dukes of Hazzard* which aired in the late 1970s and the early 1980s. *The Dukes of Hazzard* chronicles the adventures of Bo and Luke Duke, cousins living in the fictitious Hazzard County, Georgia. The mischief these two cousins encounter fits the definition of the bad boy – they are bad enough to be interesting, but their trouble is neither malicious, nor is it intended to harm others. In most episodes, the cousins unwittingly find themselves in perilous situations, often while attempting to offer assistance.

Each episode begins with a similar scenario: the corrupt mayor of Harzzard, Boss Hogg, concocts an illegal scheme, ultimately aimed at taking control of the Dukes’ farm and arresting the boys again, as they have once been arrested and sentenced to probation for illegally transporting moonshine. Much like boys who do not think of their actions, Bo and Luke are singularly focused on doing good. In order to carry out their antics against the nefarious Boss Hogg, both Bo and Luke must possess quite a bit of pluck. For example, in one episode, “Daisy’s Song,” Bo and Luke travel to the big city of Atlanta to help their cousin, Daisy, retrieve \$50 that a fake record executive scammed her out of. Thinking only of their cousin’s lost money, Bo and Luke do not consider that they may be interacting with criminals and their actions may have more repercussions than simply retrieving Daisy’s money.

Perhaps even more iconic than the orange 1969 Dodge Charger is *The Dukes of Hazzard* theme song performed by Waylon Jennings. This song begins with a stanza that could perfectly describe the nineteenth-century bad boy, Tom Sawyer, or even the boys in Morris’ *Good Old Boy*:

Just the good ol’ boys
Never meanin’ no harm
Beats all you’ve never saw, been in trouble with the law
Since the day they was born. (Jennings)

The first stanza emphasizes the non-malicious nature of the good ol’ boy: while he may be in trouble, he certainly does not enter escapades with malice. The final stanza of Jennings’ song claims that Bo and Luke “wouldn’t change if they could,” which implies that possessing the characteristics of the good ol’ boy results in a sense of pride. To continue the bad boy behavior into adulthood, as demonstrated by *The Dukes of Hazzard*, demonstrates the adult’s desire to return to an idyllic time in life, childhood.

The contemporary concept of the “good ol’ boy” has created an atmosphere in which it is acceptable for adults to enact the conventions of the bad boy story. Nostalgia for childhood allows boys to grow into adults but not leave childhood, and in current popular culture – not just literature – these man-children have taken on the persona of the “good ol’ boy.” The “good ol’ boy” is an adult male who participates in the same mischief that, at least according to the nineteenth-century conventions of bad boy literature, *should* lead to a good man, but instead, he becomes trapped in childish behavior.

Contemporary usage of “good ol’ boy” is unsettling in that the contemporary “good ol’ boy” signifies a tradition based on the literary bad boy, but the adult good ol’ boy’s tie to childhood increasingly indicates a lack of responsibility. A search for “good ol’ boy” will return a plethora of interesting, and sometimes disturbing, titles that suggest the pejorative nature the phrase has come to encompass.² There seems to be a disturbing trend of the connotation of the “good ol’ boy” becoming more and more disparaging. Whereas the nostalgia for creating the good ol’ boy seems innocent, there appears to have been a shift where nostalgia has become a reversion to childhood. Contemporary usage of the term “good ol’ boy” to refer to a Southern man has its roots planted firmly in the literary. The acceptance of the realistic, playful, and mischievous protagonist of Twain’s *Tom Sawyer* as the accurate way to portray boys’ behavior seems to have set in motion an acceptance of childhood that, in the Southern United States, even the toughest man’s man cannot escape.

Endnotes

- 1 The “old South” compared and contrasted to the “new South,” would need to be addressed in a lengthier project.
- 2 Titles include “Alabama Two-Year Colleges: Still the ‘Good Ol’ Boy’ Network” (2006) by Robert J. Walker; “Navigating the good ol’ boys club: women, marginality, and communities of practice in a military non-profit organization” (2007) by Jamie L. Callahan; “Arkansas/Arkansaw: How Bear Hunters, Hillbillies, and Good Ol’ Boys Defined a State” (2010) by Tony Harkins.

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