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Study Guide

for

The Adventures of Tom Sawyer

by Mark Twain



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Meet Mark Twain



I was born the 30th of November, 1835, in the almost invisible village of Florida, Monroe County, Missouri. . . . The village contained a hundred people and I increased the population by 1 percent. It is more than many of the best men in history could have done for a town.

—*The Autobiography of Mark Twain*

The real name of the author we know as Mark Twain was Samuel Langhorne Clemens. His father was a lawyer and store owner. While not poor, the family was never well-off.

Four years after his birth, Samuel Clemens's family moved to Hannibal, Missouri, a fast-growing town on the Mississippi River. Samuel spent the next fourteen years there.

All kinds of boats, from simple rafts and barges to magnificent steamboats, traveled the Mississippi River. In his memoir, *Life on the Mississippi* (1883), Twain recalls the excitement when the lazy summer air was pierced by the cry of "S-t-e-a-m-boat a-comin!" "All in a twinkling," he writes, "the dead town is alive and moving." Hannibal was also home to relatives, friends, and townspeople who would resurface years later as characters in Twain's fiction. Many of them appear in *Tom Sawyer*.

Clemens was only eleven years old when his father died. At thirteen he became a printer's apprentice. When he was seventeen and had learned the trade, Clemens left Hannibal to work in printing shops and on newspapers from Iowa to New York.

When he was twenty-one, Clemens returned to the Mississippi River. He trained for the job he had always wanted: steamboat pilot. When the Civil War began in 1861, Clemens took a job in Virginia City, Nevada. There he began to write humorous sketches and tall tales for the local newspaper. In February 1863, he first signed a story with the pen name that he would make famous: *Mark Twain*. It was the riverboatman's term for water two fathoms, or twelve feet, deep—meaning just barely deep enough to navigate safely.

Clemens next moved to California where he tried mining for a while. In 1865 a national magazine published his retelling of a tall tale he had heard from miners. "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County" was an instant success. As a reporter for several newspapers, he traveled to Hawaii, Europe, and the Middle East. The book he wrote about his travels, *The Innocents Abroad*, made him famous. In 1870, at the age of thirty-four, Clemens married Olivia Langdon and later moved to Hartford, Connecticut. At the same time, Clemens began his successful career as a lecturer, telling humorous stories and reading from his books.

More books followed, including *Roughing It*, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, and *The Prince and the Pauper*. Thanks to his lecture tours and books, the image of the bushy-haired, mustachioed author known as Mark Twain became familiar around the world. He died in 1910.

Introducing the Novel

Most of the adventures recorded in this book really occurred. . . . [P]art of my plan has been to try to pleasantly remind adults of what they once were themselves, and of how they felt and thought and talked, and what queer enterprises they sometimes engaged in.

—from the preface to
The Adventures of Tom Sawyer

In 1876 many Americans were in a mood to look backward. It was the hundredth anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence. The country had come a long way since it won its independence from Britain. The United States was becoming a powerful industrial country, with large cities, great factories, and railroads that crisscrossed the nation.

For city dwellers, life was growing busier and busier. They longed for a simpler time, without smoke-spewing factories and clanging streetcars. To Americans, small towns and farming communities seemed friendlier than the cities.

Mark Twain also felt this longing for a simpler time. He was a busy man, a world-famous author and lecturer, living in the East far from his small-town, southwestern roots. In the early 1870s, Twain's nostalgia was triggered by a visit he made to Hannibal. He wrote:

During my three days' stay in the town, I woke up every morning with the impression that I was a boy—for in my dreams the faces were all young again, and looked as they had looked in the old times.

In the Hannibal of his boyhood, it always seemed to be summer. The name Twain chose for the fictional version of his hometown tells you how highly he valued it. He called it St. Petersburg. In Christian beliefs, St. Peter tends the gates of heaven, and the imaginary town of St. Petersburg is very close to heaven in Mark Twain's eyes.

In the second chapter of *Tom Sawyer*, he describes life in Hannibal:

[T]he summer world was bright and fresh, and brimming with life. There was a song in every heart. . . . There was cheer in every face and a spring in every step.

Another writer, the American scholar Bernard DeVoto, echoed a word Twain himself used to describe the novel. Referring to *Tom Sawyer*, DeVoto said:

It is a hymn . . . to the richness and security of a child's world, to a phase of American society now vanished altogether, . . . to many other things in which millions of readers have recognized themselves.

Tom Sawyer is often described as an idyll. An idyll is a remembrance of simple, peaceful, and innocent country life, often by a person who now lives in the city. Many parts of *Tom Sawyer* are certainly idyllic. However, Mark Twain does not remember only the pleasant parts of life in Hannibal. Evil is floating around the edges of Tom's small-town paradise. In addition, St. Petersburg is divided into strict social classes, from wealthy, educated people to penniless drunks, enslaved African Americans, and homeless people.

Twain contrasts the world of childhood with the world of adults. Often these two worlds are in conflict. More often than not, the young people in *Tom Sawyer* succeed in tricking the adults. In many ways, Tom and his friends seem to run the town.

There is a reason for this. One of Mark Twain's purposes in writing *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* was to make fun of a type of book written for children at that time. These books portrayed admirable boys who always worked hard, behaved themselves perfectly, made touching sacrifices for others, attended church willingly, studied hard, saved their pennies, and never played hooky from school. Twain, along with some other authors of the time, felt these stories were preachy, unrealistic, and completely lacking in the fun and humor of real children's lives. From the very

first chapter, Twain makes fun of “Model Boy” books.

Throughout the novel, Twain shows that he admires imagination. Tom’s greatest strength is his imagination. It leads him to adventure, friendship, and even wealth. It is the quality that lifts him above the townspeople of Hannibal, who are too busy with their daily tasks to pay attention to the wonderful world around them. Imagination lets Tom see the wonder in daily life.

Even though *Tom Sawyer* has a serious side, most readers will remember the novel for its humor. In addition to one of the most famous episodes in American literature (the fence painting), *Tom Sawyer* contains humor of all kinds. Mark Twain can be sly or clever with words. He can choose slapstick humor or social criticism with a comic sting. The novel features oddball characters, imaginative misadventures, and vivid frontier speech. However, Mark Twain’s humor always has a dark side. His disgust with cruelty, greed,

hypocrisy, and dishonesty runs through many episodes.

Some critics claim that readers recognize something of themselves in Tom Sawyer. Tom represents a freedom that few, if any, people enjoy. This is another reason for the book’s continuing popularity. Who would not want to join in Tom’s search for lost treasure? Who has not dreamed of escaping to a deserted island to fish, swim, and play in the summer sun? Who has not longed to leave real life behind for a while and live in a world of the imagination?

THE TIME AND PLACE

The Adventures of Tom Sawyer is set in a Mississippi river town called St. Petersburg and is based on Twain’s real hometown of Hannibal, Missouri, about eighty miles north of St. Louis. The time is the mid-1840s. During the course of the novel, the characters spend time on an island in the river about five miles from town and in a cave several miles outside of town.

Did You Know?

In the years before the Civil War (1861–1865), Missouri and other southern states allowed slavery. Enslaved African Americans were a common sight in Mark Twain’s boyhood home of Hannibal. However, even though many people in Missouri were immigrants from southern

states and supporters of slavery, many others opposed it. Missourians’ mixed feelings about slavery prevented the state from joining other slaveholding states in the Confederacy and made Missouri a battleground during the Civil War.

Before You Read

The Adventures of Tom Sawyer Chapters 1–10

FOCUS ACTIVITY

You have probably heard the expression, “boys will be boys.” What does it mean to you?

Journal

Write in your journal about what this phrase means to you. Think about the circumstances in which you’ve heard it, the ways it can be used to excuse certain behavior, and the attitude it conveys.

Setting a Purpose

Read to discover Mark Twain’s attitude toward the behavior of Tom Sawyer.

BACKGROUND

Point of View

Point of view is the relationship of the narrator, or storyteller, to the events of the story. *Tom Sawyer* is told from the third-person point of view. You can imagine the narrator as a person who observes the action but does not take part in it. The reader sees everything through the narrator’s eyes and is given this perspective on events. In the first-person point of view, one of the characters, often the main character, tells the story using pronouns like *I* and *me*.

Sometimes, as in *Tom Sawyer*, the third-person narrator is very similar to the author. In this novel, it is safe to assume that the opinions of the narrator are those of Mark Twain himself. In other third-person books, the narrator does not express the opinions of the author. However, the characters in a novel speak with their own voices. One example is Huckleberry Finn’s colorful but grammatically incorrect language. This is not the way Twain himself spoke. Another important example occurs in Chapter 6, when Huck and Tom use racial slurs. Mark Twain himself became a supporter of equal rights for African Americans. One of Twain’s last works was a bitter attack on European colonial exploitation of Africa.

VOCABULARY PREVIEW

anatomy [ə nat’ə mē] *n.* study of the body

apprehensively [ap’ri hen’siv lē] *adv.* cautiously

beguiled [bi gīld’] *adj.* tricked, misled

despair [di spār] *n.* hopelessness

loathe [lōth] *v.* to hate

perplexed [pər plekst’] *adj.* confused

reluctance [ri luk’təns] *n.* hesitation

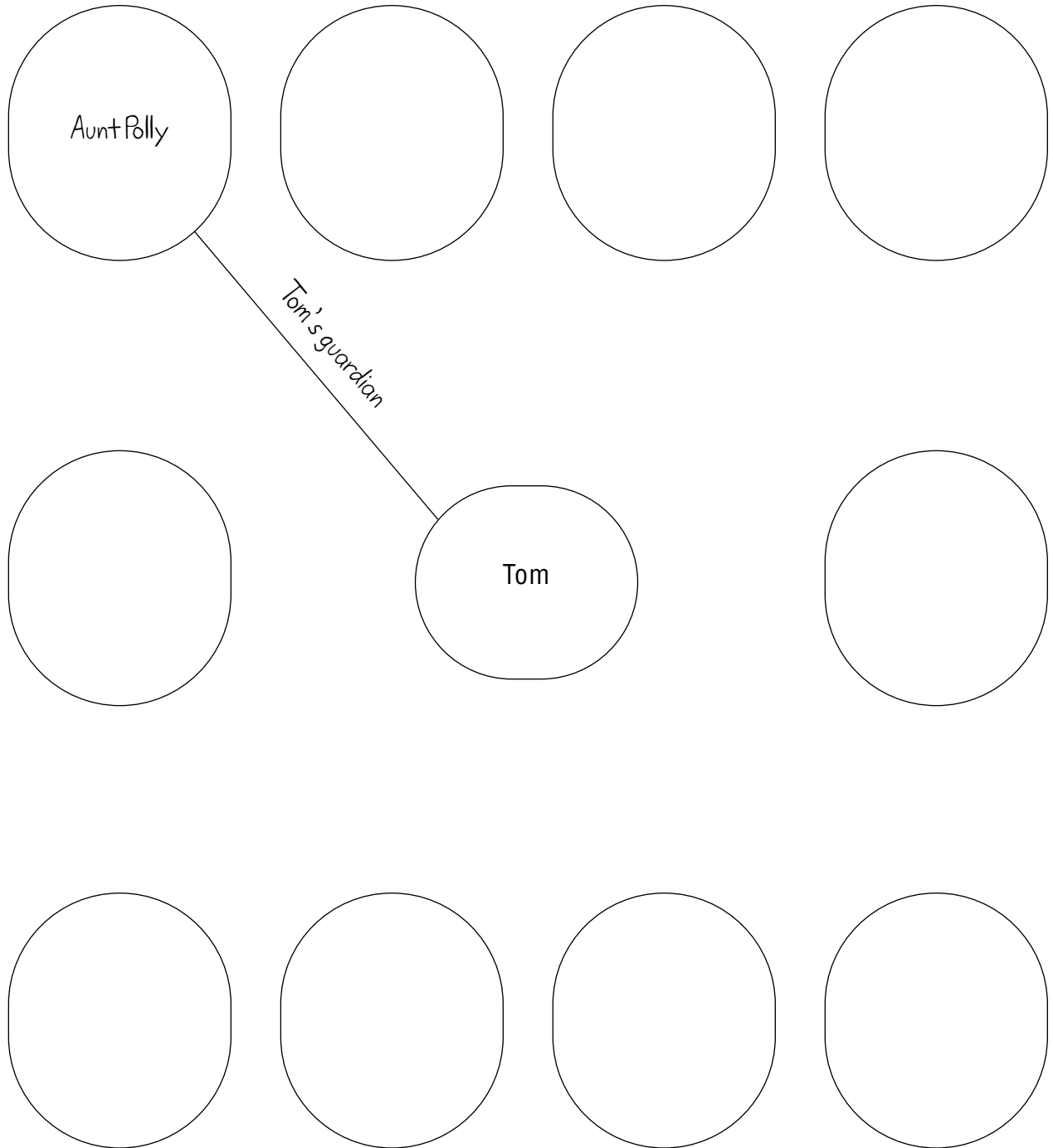
turmoil [tur’moil] *n.* uproar

wily [wī’lē] *adj.* sly

Active Reading

The Adventures of Tom Sawyer Chapters 1–10

Many new characters are introduced in the first section of *Tom Sawyer*. Use the web diagram on this page to keep track of the new characters and their relationship to Tom. As new characters appear, add each name to a circle and connect to the “Tom” circle with a line. On the line, write a short description of the character’s relationship to Tom. Also connect each new character with any other appropriate circle, and explain the relationship on a connecting line.



Responding

The Adventures of Tom Sawyer Chapters 1–10

Personal Response

What is your first impression of Tom?

Make a list of words or phrases that you think describe him.

Analyzing Literature

Recall and Interpret

1. How does Tom get his friends to whitewash the fence for him? According to Mark Twain, what “great law of human action” is he following?

2. Who is Huckleberry Finn? Why does Tom find him appealing?

3. What do Tom and Huck witness in the graveyard? What agreement do they make about what they have seen?

Responding

The Adventures of Tom Sawyer Chapters 1–10

Analyzing Literature (*continued*)

Evaluate and Connect

4. Mark Twain does not tell us what happens at the end of Chapter 4, when Tom is unable to answer the judge's question correctly. Why, in your opinion, did Twain not explain how the scene ends?

5. Tom uses his imagination to escape from the boredom of everyday life. Is this a positive or a negative characteristic? What are its advantages and disadvantages? Explain your answer.

Literature and Writing

Turning Point

Chapter 9 marks a turning point in the novel. Up to now, Tom's adventures have been play and make-believe. In the scene at the graveyard, he and Huck witness real evil. Tom is forced to make life and death decisions. Analyze this chapter, addressing such questions as the following: How does Twain create the frightening atmosphere in the graveyard? To which senses does he appeal? How does he use foreshadowing—clues planted by an author that point to events to come—to prepare the reader for the change in mood? End your analysis by making a prediction about how you think the events Tom and Huck witness will affect the rest of the novel.

Extending Your Response

Literature Groups

In the **Focus Activity**, you wrote about the use of the expression “boys will be boys” to excuse irresponsible behavior. Do you think Mark Twain is excusing behavior in Tom that others would find irresponsible or annoying? In your group, examine the text for evidence of Twain's attitude towards Tom's pranks, schemes, and, especially, treatment of other people. Do you find any indication that Mark Twain disapproves of Tom? If not, discuss why the author might be so forgiving of Tom's behavior.

Learning for Life

In Chapter 6, Twain introduces Huckleberry Finn. It is obvious that Tom and Huck have become friends. Interview one or more classmates for their views on what makes for a lasting friendship between young people.

Before You Read

The Adventures of Tom Sawyer Chapters 11–24

FOCUS ACTIVITY

Why, do you think, do some people see past events through “rose-colored glasses”? In other words, why does the past sometimes look better than it actually was?

Discuss

Discuss with a partner an experience in which you or a friend were looking through rose-colored glasses. What led to the positive feeling about the event? Did the view of the event ever change?

Setting a Purpose

Read to examine the possible influence of rose-colored glasses on *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*.

BACKGROUND

Irony and Satire

Irony and satire are two literary techniques used by Mark Twain in *Tom Sawyer*. Irony is a contrast between reality and what seems to be real. Twain comments on aspects of society that he dislikes and pokes fun at people and behavior. An example of his irony is the funeral sermon in Chapter 17. Although Tom, Joe, and Huck were considered troublemakers, the minister’s sermon paints them as sweet, generous, noble, and beautiful.

Twain’s comedy is also expressed by satire. Satire is a form of writing that exposes social evils and abuses by making fun of them. Twain hated many things about the society he grew up in: its cruelty, its hypocrisy, its greed, and its ignorance. Even though these elements do not dominate *Tom Sawyer*, they are there. For example, Twain satirizes the ignorance and cruelty of small-town schoolteachers in the character of Dobbins.

Did You Know?

Mark Twain created the characters and places in his novels partly from the people and places he knew. Tom, Mark Twain later wrote, is made up of himself as a child and two of his friends. Aunt Polly is based on Twain’s mother, and Becky on Laura Hawkins, a neighbor. Henry, Twain’s younger brother, appears in the book as Sid, but Twain noted that Henry was never a tattletale. Tom Blankenship, son of a Hannibal ne’er-do-well, was the model for Huck. In real life, Injun Joe was a pitiful homeless person. Keep in mind that the real-life people Twain used are not the characters themselves. They have been filtered through Twain’s imagination.

VOCABULARY PREVIEW

apprehension [ap’ri hen’shən] *n.* worry

chronic [kron’ik] *adj.* permanent, long-term

conspicuous [kən spik’ū əs] *adj.* obvious

frivolous [friv’ə ləs] *adj.* not serious

notoriety [nō’tə rī’ə tē] *n.* fame

ominous [om’ə nəs] *adj.* threatening

repentant [ri pent’ənt] *adj.* sorry, apologetic

vindictive [vin dik’tiv] *adj.* keen for revenge

Active Reading

The Adventures of Tom Sawyer Chapters 11–24

The long second paragraph of Chapter 14 contains one of the best descriptions in the novel. It contains many striking words and phrases that create a word painting of waking up on Jackson’s Island. As you read this paragraph, keep track of words and phrases that you feel are especially colorful and memorable. In one column of the chart below, write the word or phrase. In the other, explain how the description appeals to a reader.

Word or Phrase	How or Why It Works
cool gray dawn	appeals to senses of both touch (cool) and sight (gray)

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Responding

The Adventures of Tom Sawyer Chapters 11–24

Personal Response

Which scene was your favorite in this section? Why?

Analyzing Literature

Recall and Interpret

1. How do Tom and Huck treat Muff Potter after he has been put in jail? Why, in your opinion, do they treat him in this way?

2. Compare and contrast Tom's and Becky's actions when Tom is punished for spilling the ink and Becky is almost punished for tearing the book.

3. What important decision does Tom make at the end of this section? What result does the decision have?

Responding

The Adventures of Tom Sawyer Chapters 11–24

Analyzing Literature (*continued*)

Evaluate and Connect

4. Do you feel that Mark Twain is successful in creating Injun Joe as a villain? Does Injun Joe seem like a real person to you? Explain your answer.

5. Some readers feel that Tom goes too far in his pranks. What do you think? How would you feel if you were one of the people affected by his jokes, such as Aunt Polly or the people who attended his funeral?

Literature and Writing

Point of View

In the **Focus Activity**, you examined the experience of seeing things through “rose-colored glasses.” Apply what you learned in that activity to Chapters 11 through 24. Can you find evidence that Twain’s story and its setting are not entirely viewed through rose-colored glasses? Does he focus only on the good aspects of life in the small town, or does he include both good and bad aspects? Use examples from the novel to support your argument in writing.

Extending Your Response

Literature Groups

Superstition, or belief in magic and the supernatural, plays an important part in the lives of the people who live in St. Petersburg. Examine the text to make a list of some of the superstitions that characters mention. Discuss reasons why people on the frontier in the 1840s would have been superstitious. Then discuss superstitions that still exist, such as not walking under a ladder and avoiding the number thirteen. Examine such questions as why people still believe in superstitions and whether such beliefs are harmful or harmless.

Art Connection

The first authorized edition of *Tom Sawyer*, published in 1876, contained illustrations by the artist True Williams. Some contemporary editions include these drawings. Chapters 11 through 24 of the novel contain many colorful, humorous, and even frightening scenes. Choose one to illustrate using any medium you wish. Share your illustration with the class, read the passage on which it is based, and explain the challenges you faced in illustrating it.



Save your work for your portfolio.

Before You Read

The Adventures of Tom Sawyer Chapters 25–35

FOCUS ACTIVITY

One of the characters in the novel says, “being rich ain’t what it’s cracked up to be. It’s just worry and worry, and sweat and sweat.”

Sharing Ideas

Share ideas with a partner about the advantages and disadvantages of being wealthy. How might your life change—for the better and for the worse?

Setting a Purpose

Read to find out how the characters feel about suddenly becoming wealthy.

BACKGROUND

Bad Boys and Good Boys

You read on pages 10 and 11 about the “good boy” novels that Mark Twain poked fun at. In the final section of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, you’ll see what happens to Tom, the bad boy, and his “bad” comrade, Huck Finn. Keep in mind that the good boys of the other books never misbehaved and were rewarded with wealth, true love, and the respect and admiration of others. These good boys avoided the activities that Tom takes most pleasure in: dreaming about pirates and robbers, playing hooky, smoking, stealing, and making mischief.

The Return of Tom Sawyer—and Huck Finn

Mark Twain had great affection for his literary creations, Tom and Huck. He brought them back in other novels. In 1885, nine years after *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* was published, Twain published the first sequel to *Tom Sawyer*. This novel, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, is considered Twain’s masterpiece and one of the great American novels. It follows Huck and the runaway Jim on a journey down the Mississippi River to freedom. In 1894 Twain published *Tom Sawyer Abroad* and two years later, *Tom Sawyer, Detective*.

VOCABULARY PREVIEW

apathy [ap’ə thē] *n.* lack of interest

boundless [bound’lis] *adj.* without limits

insignificance [in’ sig nif’i kəns] *n.* lack of importance

insipid [in sip’id] *adj.* uninteresting

sentry [sen’trē] *n.* guard

subdued [səb dōōd’] *adj.* quiet

tedious [tē’ dē əs] *adj.* boring

threadbare [θred’bār’] *adj.* poor; worn out

windfall [wind’fôl] *n.* unexpected gain

Responding

The Adventures of Tom Sawyer Chapters 25–35

Personal Response

Are you satisfied with the ending of *Tom Sawyer*? Why or why not?

Do you feel the ending fits with the rest of the novel? If so, explain why. If not, what kind of ending might you prefer?

Analyzing Literature

Recall and Interpret

1. Who is Uncle Jake? What does Huck's friendship with him say about Huck? What does it say about the different levels of St. Petersburg society?

2. How does Huck help Widow Douglas? Why does he want his actions kept secret?

3. How would you describe Tom's behavior in the cave with Becky? What personal characteristics does he demonstrate?

Responding

The Adventures of Tom Sawyer Chapters 25–35

Analyzing Literature (*continued*)

Evaluate and Connect

4. In what ways can the novel be seen as a study of the effects money has on people's lives?

5. The final section of the novel contains two examples of racist attitudes expressed by the characters, along with a sexist remark. Identify one of these examples.

Literature and Writing

Tom and Huck

By the end of the novel, Tom and Huck have shared a life-changing experience and become good friends. But they are quite different in many ways. Examine the text to compare and contrast the two characters' personalities, citing differences and similarities. Offer evidence from the text to support a one- or two-paragraph comparison. Passages you may want to pay special attention to are the treasure hunting scene in Chapter 26, the scene in which the boys dig for the treasure in the cave in Chapter 33, Widow Douglas's party in Chapter 34, and the last chapter.

Extending Your Response

Literature Groups

By the time the novel ends, has Tom changed in any important way or learned something new about himself and his place in society? In your group, discuss what Tom learns in the novel, how he may have changed, what new beliefs he may have developed, and how his understanding of himself and St. Petersburg may have become sharper. Pay special attention to his final conversation with Huck in Chapter 35. Do you think Tom has become a spokesperson for the adult values of the town that he previously rebelled against?

Performing

Many readers feel that Chapter 31, when Tom and Becky are lost in the cave, is the most exciting and best written in the novel. Prepare a dramatic reading of this scene, complete with background music and sound effects that enhance the mood in the cave and the feelings of the two characters. You may want to assign three parts: Tom, Becky, and the narrator. Rehearse your reading and present it to the class.



Save your work for your portfolio.

