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Introduction

This guide is divided into eleven units of study, and includes the following components:

Pre-reading Discussion

This is a detailed section on the key elements that readers will encounter in the reading assignment. The Pre-reading Discussion centers on the literary elements of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and gives suggestions for provoking interest in the chapters ahead. The section ends with ideas for initiating class discussions about the important concepts in the book.

Study Guide and Vocabulary List

Each unit contains a study guide and vocabulary list, along with a corresponding reading assignment. Study guide pages are designed to be duplicated and distributed when the reading assignment is given. Students should answer the questions and study the vocabulary words. Each study guide contains a “Writing Forum” section, in which students are asked to write a brief explication of some textual element. You may want to choose one or all of the questions listed; students may keep the Writing Forum questions in a continuing notebook. The following day’s class session could begin with a review of the written work before proceeding to a discussion of the chapters.

Discussion Concepts

This section details the important concepts that students have encountered in their reading of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and may be used to initiate class discussions. Discussions should involve events in the story and their relevance to the characters, important themes, and comparing and contrasting actions and statements. Students should be able to find quotes to support their opinions when necessary. Teachers may want to ask students to practice note-taking periodically during this discussion.

Tests

Tests of comprehension and vocabulary are included in the *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* guide. Varied formats challenge students to think intently and creatively about the material.

Writing Projects

The writing projects at the end of the guide may be used as students progress through *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, or after the class has finished Unit 11.

Background

Type of Literature

The Adventures of Tom Sawyer is an example of realistic fiction. Its ability to portray American life in the mid-1800s makes it an important contribution to American literature.

Setting and Atmosphere

The setting of the story, or the time and place in which the events of the story occur, is a small town in Missouri around 1840. St. Petersburg is a small, insular community on the shores of the Mississippi River; the town and its inhabitants are based on the town of Hannibal, Missouri, where Mark Twain spent his childhood. In his preface, Twain asserts that most of the people and events of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* are based on true episodes from his own childhood.

The Adventures of Tom Sawyer is an idyllic picture of childhood: throughout, it romanticizes the joys of childhood. It is nonetheless an accurate picture of American life at that time in its portrayal of Sunday school and church events, school scenes, river adventures, superstitions, village pastimes, and attitudes towards blacks.

Historical Significance

Tom Sawyer is one of the most enduring works of children's literature. It was written when the purpose of children's literature was to instruct children in "good behavior." Twain, by telling this story of his childhood, initiated a radical departure from the preachy style that marks earlier children's literature. *Tom Sawyer* is generally considered to be the first children's novel in which children were portrayed realistically and in which their personalities were developed beyond a mere illustration of "bad" behavior and "good" behavior.

Author Information

Mark Twain is the pen name of Samuel Clemens, who lived and wrote during the 1800s. He is thought to be the greatest humorist in American literature; his writing style appeals to adults and children alike. Twain grew up in Hannibal, Missouri, the town on which he based the story of *Tom Sawyer*. He traveled extensively throughout the United States and Europe, where he gathered the material for much of his writing. Twain was well known for his theatrical lectures about his boyhood on the Mississippi River, for which he dressed in a signature white suit and chewed a cigar. His finest novel is considered to be *Huckleberry Finn*, a sequel to *Tom Sawyer* that deals with the more serious topics of prejudice and equality. During his lifetime, Twain and his writings achieved great fame that has steadily increased since his death in 1910.

Character Development

The characters in *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* are developed through their words, actions, and feelings. The central character in *Tom Sawyer* is the adolescent Tom, whose escapades are the focus of the novel.

The characterization of Tom is a vital aspect of *Tom Sawyer*. Tom remains much the same at the end of the novel as he was at the beginning—a boy who loves to be a leader. He is always ready for excitement; he imagines himself the "bad boy" of his middle-class church community. His ability to be irresistibly convincing (as in the famous whitewashing episode) makes him, as he often daydreams, the ideal youth; he is always the "captain of the pirates," the hero to his companions.

Yet, throughout the novel, Tom remains thoroughly grounded in the conventionalities of his time. Though he plays the “bad boy” in church, erroneously naming David and Goliath as the first two disciples, he violates the expectations of his society only as a method of fooling, not escaping, convention. Tom’s “badness” is merely his wish always to play rather than work. At the times that Tom must make a choice between being “good” and “bad,” he *always* chooses to be “good,” or just. Incidents in which he protects Becky—by taking a whipping for her and comforting her in the cave—and incidents in which he adheres to justice—by giving evidence that saves Muff Potter—show Tom to be more than just a prankster. Tom is, in fact, a “good” boy, a boy who does “the right thing.” He is even, ultimately, the picture of conventionality as he counsels the outcast Huck to be “respectable.”

Despite the fact that Tom’s antics continue throughout the novel—late in the book, he still assembles robber-gangs and treasure hunts—subtle changes occur in his behavior and in the way he is viewed by others. Tom’s decision to take Becky’s punishment would seem inappropriate at the beginning of the book, as would his choosing to testify in Muff Potter’s behalf. His emotional strength while lost in McDougal’s Cave would also seem improbable for Tom at the beginning of the book.

Other characters in the novel include Huckleberry Finn, Aunt Polly, Sid, Joe Harper, Muff Potter, and Injun Joe. Each of these characters possesses one or several traits that play off Tom’s adventuresome disposition.

Plot

The plot consists of the series of events that introduce, develop, and resolve the major conflict in the story. Conflict exists in every narrative, and may appear in various forms. Conflict may exist between one person and another, between one person and a group, or between one person and nature or the environment. Several major conflicts may exist within one story; these are subplots. Conflicts are resolved, though not necessarily happily, by the end of the text.

The plot of *Tom Sawyer* involves a series of adventures that reveal and elaborate on Tom’s character. Many episodes provide humor, excitement, horror, and suspense as Twain simultaneously illustrates and satirizes the traditions of his society. The conflict in this novel arises in Tom’s relationship with the adults in his world, as well as in his juxtaposition to the “respectability” they espouse.

Tom’s early adventures reveal his good nature, desire for center stage, flamboyant style, and flair for the dramatic. As the events of the novel become more serious, Tom’s participation in and response to them become more responsible. He uses the innate resourcefulness that has always served to make his pranks so effective to react to events that are intrinsically dramatic, like being lost in McDougal’s Cave.

Point of View

The Adventures of Tom Sawyer is told from the third-person point of view. An interesting fact about the point of view of *Tom Sawyer* is the archness of the narrator’s voice. The story is told with a shrewd attention to situational ironies; the narrator consistently offers sarcastic commentary on the action.

One consequence of this type of narrative is that Twain uses its inherent power to make the character of Tom almost folkloric in nature. Tom seems to become “special,” the prototypical figure of the “successful boy”: wild, carefree, and adventurous, a dastardly pirate in a world of dull respectability. Despite Tom’s efforts to be the “bad boy,” however, he always functions within the conventions and value systems of his society.