



The Adventures of Tom Sawyer Reader's Guide

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Category: Literary Fiction | Fiction Classics

READERS GUIDE

Questions and Topics for Discussion

1. In his preface, Mark Twain remarks that "Although my book is intended mainly for the entertainment of boys and girls, I hope it will not be shunned by men and women on that account, for part of my plan has been to try to pleasantly remind adults of what they once were themselves. . . ." Do you think Twain succeeds in this "plan"? Discuss the ways in which Tom Sawyer can be read by both children and adults—do different aspects of the book appeal to different kinds of readers? Are different episodes designed, as some critics have suggested, to appeal to different audiences?
2. How does Tom Sawyer relate to the world of adult authority and responsibility? Can he be said to "mature" during the course of the novel, as critics have asserted? If so in what ways?
3. Discuss the town of St. Petersburg, Missouri, Tom Sawyer's home. How would you describe it? What literary devices or descriptions, to your mind, make Twain's portrayal of rural American life in the years before the Civil War interesting, unique, appealing?
4. Virginia Wexman notes that in Tom Sawyer "we are confronted with two clearly separate worlds. The first world is a light and engaging one . . . where life is played at . . . the world of Tom himself. . . . But there is another world here too, a darker world where actions have real meaning and real moral consequences—the world of people like Injun Joe and Muff Potter." Discuss each of these "two worlds," and the ways in which they are related to each other in the novel.

5. Discuss Tom's relationship with Huckleberry Finn, from their first encounter, through their subsequent adventures. What do you make of this friendship? Why are these characters drawn to each other? Compare this relationship with other relationships in the novel, for instance Tom's relationship to Becky Thatcher.

6. Discuss Twain's use of particular geographical settings as scenes for episodes in the novel: the river, the island, the cave. Why do you think these particular landscapes are chosen? How do they inform the action of the novel?

7. Tom Sawyer is one of the most recognizable and revered characters in American literature; as Lyall Powers writes, "Everybody knows Tom's story whether he has actually read the book or not." What do you think accounts for the enduring popularity of Twain's literary creation?
