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## Lesson One

### FOCUS: Biography

Examining an author's life can inform and expand the reader's understanding of a novel. Biographical criticism is the practice of analyzing a literary work through the lens of an author's experience. In this lesson, explore the author's life to understand the novel more fully.

In his preface to *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, Mark Twain acknowledges, "Most of the adventures recorded in this book really occurred. . . . Huck Finn is drawn from life; Tom Sawyer also . . ." Before adopting the pen name of Mark Twain, Samuel Langhorne Clemens grew up in Hannibal, Missouri, a town on the Mississippi River where several steamboats stopped every day. Although not an orphan like Tom Sawyer, Clemens was only eleven years old when his father died. Like Tom, he was a rebellious and high-spirited boy who cut school to play in the woods, swim in the river, and explore caves with his friends. One of those friends, Tom Blankenship, was the son of the town drunk and Twain's model for Huckleberry Finn.

### Discussion Activities

Listen to The Big Read Audio Guide. Have students take notes as they listen. Ask them to present the three most important points learned from the Audio Guide.

Read the following essays from the Reader's Guide: "Introduction to the Novel" (p. 3), "Mark Twain, 1835–1910" (pp. 5–7), and "Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn" (pp. 8–9). Divide the class into groups and assign one essay to each. The groups will present a summary of the main points they learned from their essay.

### Writing Exercise

Have the students write a short essay about a favorite novel whose main character is a child. How is childhood depicted in the novel—idyllically, comically, fearfully? Discuss the opportunities and problems the subject of childhood might pose for a writer of literary fiction.

### Homework

Distribute Handout One: Mark Twain's Literary Influence. Read Chapters I–III (pp. 11–30). Prepare your students to read approximately twenty-five pages per night in order to complete reading this book in eight lessons. How do the first three chapters present this period in American history? How does Twain depict education? How does Twain depict religion?