

2

Lesson Two

FOCUS: Culture and History

Cultural and historical contexts give birth to the dilemmas and themes at the center of the novel. Studying these contexts and appreciating intricate details of the time and place help readers understand the motivations of the characters.

The novel sets Tom's adventures against the backdrop of village life in the Midwest during the first half of the nineteenth century. Twain shows the intellectual and emotional narrowness of small-town life. For Tom, the chief institutions of society are school and church. Both emphasize rote learning, using memorization and repetition, focusing on moral development through conformity and propriety. Rules and standards are enforced by coercion, whether in the form of hellfire sermons by the minister or whippings by the frustrated schoolmaster.

Discussion Activities

Ask students to identify specific passages in the first three chapters where Twain uses humor or sarcasm to critique the traditions of small-town life. Present and discuss the concept of satire (the practice of scrutinizing human vice or folly through irony, derision, or wit) by examining how Twain's storytelling affably critiques the assumptions at work in Tom's world.

Discuss how the techniques of humor and satire allow us to recognize implicit cultural assumptions and principles both in Tom's world and in our own culture. Does Twain's use of humor reflect skepticism and distrust toward the society portrayed in the novel?

Writing Exercise

The whitewashing of the fence in Chapter II is probably the best-known episode in the book. Does the restrictive nature of school and church lead Tom and other children to be more inventive outside of school?

What point is Twain making regarding human nature? Write two pages on whether the limits of school and church make Tom and the other boys more inventive or less inventive.

Homework

Read Chapters IV–VI (pp. 31–57). Consider the accounts of the address by Mr. Walters, the Sunday School Superintendent (pp. 35–38), and the sermon by the Rev. Sprague (pp. 44–45). What is added to these descriptions by the style in which Twain presents them?