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Lesson Three

FOCUS: Narrative and Point of View

The narrator tells the story with a specific perspective informed by his or her beliefs and experiences. Narrators can be major or minor characters, or exist outside the story altogether. The narrator weaves her or his point of view, including ignorance and bias, into telling the tale. A first-person narrator participates in the events of the novel, using “I.” A distanced narrator, often not a character, is removed from the action of the story and uses the third person (he, she, and they). The distanced narrator may be omniscient, able to read the minds of all the characters, or limited, describing only certain characters’ thoughts and feelings. Ultimately, the type of narrator determines the point of view from which the story is told.

The Adventures of Tom Sawyer is told from a third-person omniscient point of view. As early as the third page, Twain presents the unspoken thoughts of Aunt Polly and Tom in two successive sentences in the same paragraph: “And it flattered her to reflect that she had discovered that the shirt was dry without anybody knowing that that was what she had in her mind. But in spite of her, Tom knew where the wind lay, now” (p. 13). Throughout the book, the narrative voice—whose vocabulary, sensibility, and insights are clearly those of an adult—inserts itself between the reader and the characters and events being described.

Discussion Activities

How does the third-person adult perspective provide extra dimension to the presentation of the characters, setting, and events of the first six chapters?

Discuss the address of Mr. Walters, and the sermon by the Rev. Sprague. What is the tone of the narrator during these segments? How does the way these passages are written add to the tone and effect of the book thus far?

Writing Exercise

Have each student, as Tom or Huck, write a one-paragraph description of the personality of the other character and the nature of their relationship. Ask several students to share their work with the class. How does the story change when it is narrated from Tom’s or Huck’s point of view?

Homework

Read Chapters VII–XI (pp. 58–87). Consider Aunt Polly as she has been presented thus far. Do you find her character sympathetic or not? Explain.