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Lesson Four

FOCUS: Characters

The central character in a work of literature is called the protagonist. The protagonist usually initiates the main action of the story and often overcomes a flaw, such as weakness or ignorance, to achieve a new understanding by the work's end. A protagonist who acts with great honor or courage may be called a hero. An antihero is a protagonist lacking these qualities. Instead of being dignified, brave, idealistic, or purposeful, the antihero may be cowardly, self-interested, or weak. The protagonist's journey is enriched by encounters with characters who hold differing beliefs. One such character type, a foil, has traits that contrast with the protagonist's and highlight important features of the main character's personality. The most important foil, the antagonist, opposes the protagonist, barring or complicating his or her success.

While Tom serves as the protagonist, a number of vibrant characters provide foils. Aunt Polly provides an adult foil, Huck provides a foil that makes Tom appreciate his own world, and Becky challenges Tom to be a man.



Discussion Activities

Novelist E.L. Doctorow observes that Tom Sawyer's is a "world of two distinct and, for the most part, irreconcilable life forms, the Child and the Adult... And because power and authority reside in the Adult, Tom is necessarily a rebel acting in the name of freedom. Thus he is understood not as a bad boy but as a good boy who is amiably, creatively, and as a matter of political principle bad—unlike his half brother Sid, who is that all too recognizable archetype of everyone's childhood, the actually bad boy who appears in the perverse eyesight of adults to be good" ("Sam Clemens's Two Boys," in *Creationists*, p. 57). Is this a valid statement? How might Sid be a foil and/or antagonist to Tom? If Doctorow is right, how do you think this will affect the rest of the story? Will Tom ever be recognized as good? Does Twain make a statement about human nature that transcends Tom's small-town world?



Writing Exercise

List Tom's three most prominent personality traits, backing up each choice by describing any incidents in the text thus far that serve as the basis for that choice. How do the incidents help us understand his character and the tensions in his life?



Homework

Read Handout Two: Mark Twain's Comic Voice. Read Chapters XII–XVI (pp. 88–119). Pay particular attention to the passage about Peter the cat in Chapter XII. What might be Twain's main intention, and how does his use of language contribute to the fulfillment of that intention?