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Lesson Six

FOCUS: Symbols

Symbols are persons, places, or things in a narrative that have significance beyond a literal understanding. The craft of storytelling depends on symbols to present ideas and point toward new meanings. Most frequently, a specific object will be used to refer to (or symbolize) a more abstract concept. The repeated appearance of an object suggests a non-literal, or figurative, meaning attached to the object. Symbols are often found in the book's title, at the beginning and end of the story, within a profound action, or in the name or personality of a character. The life of a novel is perpetuated by generations of readers interpreting and reinterpreting the main symbols. By identifying and understanding symbols, readers can reveal new interpretations of the novel.

Most of the settings illuminate Twain's conception of childhood as reflected in Tom's adventures. As a result, Tom himself becomes a symbol of the complexities of the child's world, the adult world, and the intersections between these two worlds.

Discussion Activities

A particularly powerful symbol, the Mississippi River represents adventure, freedom, and the world beyond St. Petersburg. The boys' journey to Jackson Island begins their separation from the safety and security of small-town life. How are the river and the island symbols? What cues in the text suggest they might have a symbolic function? How does the storm affect Tom, and what might it represent? Why does he believe God sent the storm as punishment for his misbehavior?

Writing Exercise

Have your students write a brief essay examining one of the following topics. Discuss the symbolism of the piece of bark on which Tom writes his note to Aunt Polly, with emphasis on how it functions to show several different sides of Tom's nature. Or analyze how the fence Tom whitewashes in the novel's first chapters serves as a symbol. How was Aunt Polly's punishment both fitting and ironic?

Homework

Read Chapters XXIII–XXVII (pp. 150–175). Has Tom changed at all since the beginning of the book, or does he just keep displaying the same traits over and over again?