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Lesson Seven

FOCUS: Character Development

Novels trace the development of characters who encounter a series of challenges. Most characters contain a complex balance of virtues and vices. Internal and external forces require characters to question themselves, overcome fears, or reconsider dreams. The protagonist may undergo profound change. A close study of character development maps, in each character, the evolution of motivation, personality, and belief. The tension between a character's strengths and weaknesses keeps the reader guessing about what might happen next and the protagonist's eventual success or failure.

Chapter XXIII gives the best depiction of Tom's maturation, reflecting his character development. In Chapter X, after witnessing the murder of Dr. Robinson, he and Huck had taken a blood oath, on pain of dropping down dead, that they would never tell anyone what they saw. Motivated entirely by fear of Injun Joe, their silence may very well cost an innocent man his life. But as Muff Potter's trial proceeds toward the certainty of a guilty verdict, Tom suffers increasing torments of conscience, leading up to his revelation and testimony.

Discussion Activities

In his 2004 book on Mark Twain, Larzer Ziff maintains that “Tom’s adventures do not follow one another in any necessary order because Twain is not concerned with the evolution of Tom’s character” and that “none of Tom’s adventures alters his character or matures him—he is always the boy he was” (p. 65). Is this view valid? Why or why not? Can you find evidence to support Ziff? Can you find evidence to refute him? Cite passages from the text to support your view. Extend this discussion by conducting a debate on Ziff’s interpretation.

Writing Exercise

Does Tom’s choice to testify seem credible in terms of his character as it has been presented to us? Cite any earlier instances of similar behavior that might foreshadow this action.

Homework

Read Chapters XXVIII–XXXI (pp. 176–203). Based on how Tom’s previous adventures have turned out, what do you think will happen in the end?