

# 9

## Lesson Nine

### FOCUS: Themes of the Novel

Themes are the central, recurring subjects of a novel. As characters grapple with circumstances such as racism, class, or unrequited love, profound questions will arise in the reader's mind about human life, social pressures, and societal expectations. Classic themes include intellectual freedom versus censorship, the relationship between one's personal moral code and larger political justice, and spiritual faith versus rational considerations. A novel often reconsiders these age-old debates by presenting them in new contexts or from new points of view.



### Discussion Activities and Writing Exercise



Use the following questions to stimulate discussion or provide writing exercises in order to interpret the novel in specific ways. Using historical references to support ideas, explore the statements *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* makes about the following themes:

#### Childhood

The novel is generally regarded as a sunny, if not idyllic, portrayal of childhood. But there is a minority opinion, as exemplified in the title of a 1980 essay by Cynthia Griffin Wolff, "*The Adventures of Tom Sawyer: A Nightmare Vision of American Boyhood.*" Which of these two views seems to you the more accurate assessment, and why?

#### Maturity

In the Conclusion, Twain writes: "So endeth this chronicle. It being strictly a history of a *boy*, it must stop here; the story could not go much further without becoming the history of a *man*" (p. 225). Has Tom in fact significantly matured over the course of the book? If so, in what ways, and as the result of which experiences?

#### Freedom vs. Responsibility

In the last chapter, Huck Finn seems absolutely unwilling—indeed, unable—to submit himself to the constraints of society and its expectations, while Tom speaks for a more accommodating approach. Which of the two views, if either, do you think Twain is affirming? Explain the reasons for your choice.



### Homework

Begin working on essays. Outlines are due at the next class.