

THE ADVENTURES OF TOM SAWYER STUDY GUIDE

by Alisa Thomas

For the novel by
Mark Twain



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Table of Contents

Study Guide Author	3
Peer Review Panel	4
Note to Instructor	6
Synopsis	7
About the Novel's Author	8
Ideas for Pre-reading Activities	12
Chapters 1–5	14
Chapters 6–10	24
Chapters 11–15	32
Chapters 16–20	38
Chapters 21–25	46
Chapters 26–30	51
Chapters 31–36	55
Overview	60
Essay Projects	64
Additional Resources	67
Answer Key	69

Synopsis

Tom Sawyer is one of the most popular protagonists in the history of American literature. Although Tom resides in a small, ordinary Missouri town, his daring exploits land him in the center of many thrilling adventures.

Tom lives with his Aunt Polly, an elderly woman who dearly loves her nephew but struggles to control her mischievous charge. Tom loathes going to school or church. He would rather spend time immersed in fictional plots or romancing Becky Thatcher, the new girl in town. Tom envies the life of Huckleberry Finn, the town outcast. Huck, homeless and essentially an orphan, can do whatever he pleases and doesn't have to obey anyone.

While testing a wart-removal cure in the town graveyard, Tom and Huck witness the brutal murder of Dr. Robinson. Both Tom and Huck wrestle with feelings of guilt when the wrong man, Muff Potter, is prosecuted for the crime. However, the boys initially hide their shared knowledge out of fear of retribution from the guilty party, Injun Joe.

Bothered by his conscience and the "unjust" treatment he receives at home, Tom plots an escape from his gloomy existence. Tom, his friend Joe Harper, and Huckleberry Finn run away to a nearby island where they decide to become pirates. The residents of St. Petersburg are convinced that the boys must have drowned in the Mississippi River and grief consumes the entire village. Tom's dramatic plan to walk into his own funeral causes him to become the focal point of community life.

The normally quiet town is brought to life again during Muff Potter's murder trial. Tom remains deeply troubled that an innocent man may face the ultimate punishment for the act and eventually makes a significant decision at great personal cost.

Though still worried that Injun Joe may seek revenge, Tom and Huck become distracted from their concern with a new exploit: they decide to search for buried treasure. But when an unexpected encounter with Injun Joe reveals a vast treasure, the two boys set aside their fears and focus their efforts on claiming Injun Joe's amazing treasure for themselves.

Chapters 16–20

Vocabulary:

For the following vocabulary selections, consider how each word is used in the context of the sentence. Write a brief definition of each term in your own words, then write down the dictionary definition.

1. “But Tom was uneasy nevertheless, and was alarmed to see Joe go sullenly on with his dressing. And then it was discomforting to see Huck eyeing Joe’s preparations so wistfully, and keeping up such an ominous silence. Presently, without a parting word, Joe began to wade off towards the Illinois shore.”

sullenly

Your Definition:

Dictionary Definition:

wistfully

Your Definition:

Dictionary Definition:

ominous

Your Definition:

Dictionary Definition:

The Adventures of Tom Sawyer Study Guide

6. “At school the children made so much of him and Joe, and delivered such eloquent admiration from their eyes, that the two heroes were not long in becoming insufferably ‘stuck-up.’”

Your Definition:

Dictionary Definition:

7. “Then she sat moody, with wounded pride, till the bell rang. She roused up, now, with a vindictive cast in her eye, and gave her plaited tails a shake, and said she knew what she’d do.”

Your Definition:

Dictionary Definition:

8. “At recess Tom continued his flirtation with Amy with jubilant self-satisfaction. And he kept drifting about to find Becky and lacerate her with the performance.”

Your Definition:

Dictionary Definition:

Descriptive Writing:

Twain’s description of the storm in Chapter 17 is one of the most intense passages in the novel. Twain expertly describes the gradual approach of the storm, the storm’s increase in intensity, the climax of the storm, and the gradual retreat as the storm diminishes. Notice, however, that in his description, Twain rarely uses the words “thunder,” “lightning,” “wind,” or even “storm.”

Reread this passage noting the words Twain uses in his description. For each of the elements below, write down a different word or phrase Twain uses to describe this thing.

The Adventures of Tom Sawyer Study Guide

3. What makes Huck feel “abashed and uncomfortable” at the funeral? What does Tom do when he notices Huck’s discomfort? How does Aunt Polly respond?

4. What does this small scene tell us about the characters of Tom and Aunt Polly?

5. Why does Aunt Polly hesitate before looking in Tom’s jacket for the piece of bark? How does she respond when she finds the bark?

Analysis:

6. From what do Tom and Joe get the greatest pleasure when they experiment with smoking? Why do you think this is?

7. How does Tom treat Becky when they meet after the funeral? Why?

8. How do Tom and Becky each attempt to make the other feel jealous? Do these attempts work?

The Adventures of Tom Sawyer Study Guide

9. What does Alfred Temple do when he realizes that Becky “had simply made a convenience of him to vent her spite on Tom Sawyer”?

Dig Deeper:

10. What do each of the following verses say about jealousy?
 - a. Proverbs 27:4—
 - b. 1 Corinthians 3:1–3—
 - c. Galatians 5:19–23—
11. Because jealousy is a feeling, (as opposed to an action) it’s sometimes hard for us to have control over it. We can, however, control how we choose to respond to these feelings. Think of a time you felt jealous. What caused this feeling? What was your response?
12. We need to learn to recognize feelings of jealousy as they arise. What are some proper responses to feelings of jealousy?

The Adventures of Tom Sawyer Study Guide

Dig Deeper:

12. These verses teach that it is important to discipline a child—even using corporal punishment if necessary—in order to keep him from sin.
13. Answers will vary. Parents are also commanded to raise their children to know what is right. (See, for example, Proverbs 22:6.) Aunt Polly sees it as her duty to bring Tom up right. If Tom misbehaves, she sees it as her own failing.
14. Answers may vary. Regardless of their biological relationship, Aunt Polly is the person responsible for raising Tom. Therefore, Tom should obey her as he would a parent.
15. Answers will vary.
16. Answers may vary. This is the first place—but not the last—where Twain employs a satirical tone in his novel. He depicts a congregation preoccupied with appearing pious by humorously overemphasizing their piety. (“ . . . the ladies would lift up their hands and let them fall helplessly in their laps, and ‘wall’ their eyes, and shake their heads, as much as to say, ‘Words cannot express it; it is too beautiful, *too* beautiful for this mortal earth.’”) He jokes about the behavior of the choir. (“There was once a church choir that was not ill-bred, but I have forgotten where it was, now.”) He points out the “queer custom” of the lengthy reading of the church bulletin “till it seemed that the list would stretch out to the crack of doom.” He emphasizes Tom’s restlessness during the long, detailed prayer, and the entire congregation’s boredom during the sermon. It takes the arrival of a dog to bring any real joy to the congregation.
17. Answers will vary.
18. a. This verse clarifies the value of sacrificial giving as a means of glorifying the Lord’s holy nature. b. Humility is necessary to truly give honor to God. This passage emphasizes the value of acknowledging His complete sovereignty over all aspects of our lives. c. This verse discusses the need for pure motivation as one comes before the Lord.

Chapters 6–10

Vocabulary:

1. ~~fringes~~, fetters; 2. ~~appeasing~~, lugubrious; 3. ~~smelly~~, odious; 4. ~~outrigger~~, pariah; 5. ~~generosity~~, ostentation; 6. ~~clumsily~~, stealthily; 7. ~~expectations~~, incantations; 8. ~~place~~, juncture

Similes and Metaphors:

1. (as) The way Tom felt is being compared to the feelings of an astronomer.
2. (like) Clods of dirt being thrown at Sid are being compared to a hailstorm.
3. (like) The rising sun beaming on the village is being compared to the giving of a benediction.
4. (as) The size of his cravat (necktie) is being compared to the size of a bank note.
5. (like) The shape of his boot-toes is being compared to the turned-up tips of sleigh-runners.
6. The looks Aunt Polly is giving are being compared to lightning.
7. There are actually two metaphors in this sentence. First, Tom’s mood is compared to storm clouds, and then Mary’s disposition is being compared to sunshine and song.
8. The attention people are giving to Judge Thatcher, or his feeling of importance, is being compared to the sun.
9. The surprise of Tom’s request is being compared to the appearance of a thunderbolt out of a clear sky.
10. Tom’s infatuation with Becky Thatcher is being compared to an act of religious devotion. Becky Thatcher is described as a “sacred presence.” The quiet of the scene is “holy calm.” Candles add to the sacred atmosphere. The maid-servant’s voice is said to “profane” the calm. Tom Sawyer is described as a “prone martyr.”
11. Aunt Polly’s family worship time is being compared to the building of a large mountainous structure. Twain describes the prayer as being “built from the ground up” and being built with “solid courses” of scripture. The scripture is wedded together with a “thin mortar” of originality, and Aunt Polly is described as delivering her words from “the summit” of this structure.

Questions:

1. Tom pretends to be sick as a result of a sore toe. When this doesn’t convince his aunt, he tells her that his loose tooth aches. She solves the problem by pulling the tooth.
2. Tom finds himself preoccupied by thoughts of Becky Thatcher and his attempts to woo her. Later, he and Joe Harper occupy themselves by playing with a tick.
3. He admits that he was previously engaged to Amy Lawrence.
4. Tom and Huck go to the graveyard to try out Huck’s cure for warts.
5. The three men are graverobbing.