

Twain: Essay Topics

Instructions:

1. Compose a formal essay (3-5 pages) on one of the following two topics.

Option A

In his essay collection *Criticism and Fiction*, William Dean Howells argues that literature and art should be "the expression of life ... not to be judged by any other test than their fidelity to it." He expands his argument with the provocative metaphor of an ideal versus a real grasshopper, noting that the ideal grasshopper is "made up of wire and cardboard, very prettily painted in a conventional tint," therefore denying the "simple, natural, and honest" portrayal of life that should be the center of art.

Howells' "expression of life" statement might be considered the credo of the new Realism that became a dominant literary movement in the last half of the 19th century. He seems to define realism in terms of the objective, photographic recording of experience, but in doing so, ignites an intellectual argument about what is the meaning of the term "real"?

Your task, after careful consideration of the above statements, is to assess Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* in relation to Howells' argument. In other words, is the text an "ideal grasshopper," "wire and cardboard, very prettily painted in a conventional tint" or is it "the real grasshopper," capturing the "fidelity" of life in "simple, natural, honest" expression?

Consider launching your analysis by defining what you consider the term "real" encompasses. Draw vigorously from the text to clarify how the text specifically supports or does not fulfill your definition.

Option B

Develop an analysis of one or more (not more than three) threads of the novel that you find the most appealing. Consider some of the following:

- Tom's tricks on others
- the portrayal of adolescent love
- the characterization of Aunt Polly
- scenes of jealousy between Tom and Becky
- characterizations of Becky Thatcher
- suspense scenes
- hero scenes
- Sunday school/church scenes
- the courtroom trial
- the portrayal of playground dynamics
- Tom and Huck's underlying compassion for the underdog
- Huck Finn's reaction to civilization

In your essay, include analysis of both content and process (specific ways Twain develops the topic). Avoid a laundry list response. Control your paper with a thesis that sets up an overriding critical position from which to examine your choices.

2. Give an oral presentation on comparisons between *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and one or more other texts that are built around adolescents; for instance: Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*, *Eight Cousins*, or *Little Men*; Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island*; *The Hardy Boys* series; the *Nancy Drew* series; *The Little Rascals* re-runs, particularly the schoolhouse scenes. Remember that *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* was first published in 1875. In your analysis, compare the nature of the narratives and episodes, and Mark Twain's style of development in relation to that of other sources. You may also wish to consider a comparison of the portrayal of gender roles in the different time periods.
3. Write an adventure chapter to add to *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. As you prepare to write, scrutinize Twain's process of development and try to stay true to his style of building such elements as exposition and characterization, as well as his devices of projecting the undercurrents of the early adolescent mind, and his methods of developing suspense and humor in the episodes.
4. Twain's *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* is rich in possibilities for dramatization. Ask students to develop a storyboard plan for a dramatization or film, keeping the following guidelines in mind.
 - You are limited to a one-hour production. What will your starting point be? What will you select out to use in the abridged production? What is your rationale for the selection?
 - Considering the fact that you must make cuts in the novel, how will you bind together what you maintain to achieve some cohesiveness in what is already a "loose" episodic structure? Use an outside narrator? Have Aunt Polly weave the episodes together as the other characters act them out? Other?
 - One might argue that the "real" of the novel—that is, the sense of its "simple, honest, natural" portrayal of boyhood—emerges from Twain's early "stream of consciousness" development. What modes of dramatic presentation would you use to project this "mindstream" element to the audience while still preserving the "honesty" of "inner consciousness" that Twain captures on paper?