



Mark Twain's Literacy Influence: Essay Contest



Rules and Guidelines:

The contest opens October 1, 2009, and deadline for all entries is February 15, 2010. Participants will be judged as student entries, grades 4th-8th and 9th-12th, and as adult entries. Grades 4-8 should not exceed 500 words, grades 9-12 should not exceed 750 words and Adults should not exceed 1,000 words.

Entries must be submitted via internet to Melissa@foundryartcentre.org, or by a CD disk in Microsoft Word document format. Entries must include name, address, phone number and email address if applicable. Do not send in handwritten essays or hard copies in printed form.

Participants should organize their ideas around a thesis about the novel, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. This statement should be focused with clear reasons supporting its conclusion. The thesis and supporting reasons should be backed by references to the text. **Free copies of *Adventures of Tom Sawyer* will be available for pick up at the Foundry Art Centre as of October 1st.**

Winning essays will be published in the quarterly Foundry Art Centre Newsletter, the Foundry website, the local newspaper, and will be considered for publication in *The Mid Rivers Review: A Literary Journal*. A book containing the top essays will be published and available at the Foundry Art Centre. Winners may also be rewarded with an area bookstore gift card to further promote reading. Also, winners will have the option to read their essays aloud at the Kick Off event January 31st.

Student Essay Topics:

- 1.) What are Tom Sawyer's prized possessions in the book?
- 2.) How did Tom Sawyer mature during the course of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*?
- 3.) Analyze the character of Aunt Polly and her relationship with Tom.

Adult Essay Topics:

- 1.) Discuss Twain's depiction of church and school. Are they agencies of spiritual and intellectual growth, or engines of conformity and inhibition, or both? Do some characters find more value in these institutions than others? If so, why?
- 2.) Several of the characters in the novel express racist attitudes about blacks and Indians, but no character ever expresses an opposing point of view. Is it enough for Twain to have accurately shown the prejudices of the society he is writing about without having a character express the opposing viewpoint? Is the narrator impartial? Would a more forceful condemnation of racist attitudes have strengthened or weakened the novel?

- 3.) Consider the characters of Aunt Polly, Becky Thatcher, and the Widow Douglas. Based on their actions and statements, what might Twain be saying about the role or function of women in the society he is describing?
- 4.) Later in his life, Twain expressed some very bitter judgments about human nature, views that might be said to have a pale foreshadowing in the first paragraph of Chapter XXXV (p.220), which describes the townspeople's view of Tom and Huck after their discovery of the treasure. Would you describe Twain's view of human nature in Tom Sawyer as generally dark or pessimistic? If not, how would you characterize it?
- 5.) Discuss the following statement by Shelley Fisher Fishkin: "Twain's Tom is full of youthful energy, to be sure, but his character is more complicated than that." (Lighting Out for the Territory, p.137). Identify some of Tom's most dominant character traits. How do they contribute to the reader's acceptance of Tom as "real" and fully developed, rather than a two-dimensional character?
- 6.) Write on the theme "How old is Tom Sawyer?" citing textual examples to back up your conclusions. You may wish to cite from the following passage from the E.L. Doctorow essay: "Tom Sawyer is ageless. I don't mean that he is a boy for all the ages, although he may be – I mean that he is a boy of no determinable age. When he falls in love he exhibits the behavior of a six-year-old. When he is cunning or manipulative he might be nine or ten. His athleticism places him nearer the age of twelve. And in self-dramatization and insensitivity to all feelings but his own he is unquestionably a teenager. The variety of his moods, including his deep funks when he feels unloved, his manic exhibitionism, his retributive fantasies, sweeps him up and down the scale of juvenile thought" (58-59).

***Deadline for entries is February 15, 2010. Entries should be postmarked on that date or may be submitted by person at the Foundry Art Centre 520 North Main Center, St. Charles, MO 63301. Call the Foundry at 636-270-0270 or visit www.foundryartcentre.org for additional information.**

