



Eighth Grade

ELA

Learning Targets

- Analyze comic situations in a literary text collaboratively.
- Determine the impact of word choice on meaning and tone in a comic situation.

Preview

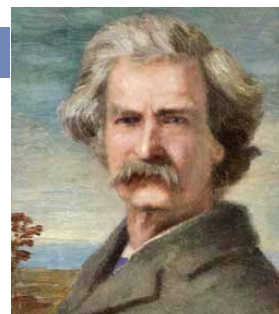
In this activity, you will read an excerpt from a novel and think about the author's use of irony to create comic situations.

Setting a Purpose for Reading

- As you read the excerpt, underline any comic situations you find for further analysis later.
- Circle unknown words and phrases. Try to determine the meaning of the words by using context clues, word parts, or a dictionary.

About the Author

Born Samuel Langhorne Clemens, Mark Twain (1835–1910) was an American author and humorist. He adopted his pen name while writing stories, sketches, and editorials as a reporter. His style—often funny and satirical—made him famous. He is noted for his novels *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885) and *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876). He has been lauded as the “greatest American humorist of his age.”



Novel Excerpt
from

The Adventures of Tom Sawyer

by Mark Twain

“A Day’s Work”

Chunk 1

1 SATURDAY morning was come, and all the summer world was bright and fresh, and brimming with life. There was a song in every heart; and if the heart was young the music issued at the lips. There was cheer in every face and a spring in every step. The locust-trees were in bloom and the fragrance of the blossoms filled the air. Cardiff Hill, beyond the village and above it, was green with vegetation and it lay just far enough away to seem a Delectable Land, dreamy, reposeful, and inviting.

Chunk 2

2 Tom appeared on the sidewalk with a bucket of whitewash and a long-handled brush. He surveyed the fence, and all gladness left him and a deep melancholy settled down upon his spirit. Thirty yards of board fence nine feet high. Life to him seemed hollow, and existence but a burden. Sighing, he dipped his brush and passed it along the topmost plank; repeated the operation; did it again; compared the insignificant whitewashed streak with the far-reaching continent of unwhitewashed fence, and sat down on a tree-box discouraged. Jim came skipping out at the gate with a tin pail, and singing Buffalo Gals. Bringing water from the town pump had always been hateful work in Tom’s eyes, before, but now it did not strike him so. He remembered that there was company at the pump. White, mulatto, and negro boys and girls were always there waiting their turns, resting, trading playthings, quarrelling, fighting, skylarking. And he remembered that although the pump was only a hundred and fifty yards off, Jim never got back with a bucket of water under an hour—and even then somebody generally had to go after him. Tom said:

WORD CONNECTIONS

Multiple Meaning Words

The word **whitewash** has come to have a second meaning. In this story, *whitewash* means “a whitening mixture used on fences and walls.” The word has also come to mean “to conceal or cover up crimes, scandals, flaws, or failures.” You can see how this usage comes from the idea of using whitewash to cover up something bad.

Chunk 3

3 “Say, Jim, I’ll fetch the water if you’ll whitewash some.”

4 Jim shook his head and said:

5 “Can’t, Mars Tom. Ole missis, she tole me I got to go an’ git dis water an’ not stop foolin’ roun’ wid anybody. She say she spec’ Mars Tom gwine to ax me to whitewash, an’ so she tole me go ’long an’ ’tend to my own business—she ’lowed SHE’D ’tend to de whitewashin.”

6 “Oh, never you mind what she said, Jim. That’s the way she always talks. Gimme the bucket—I won’t be gone only a minute. SHE won’t ever know.”

7 “Oh, I dasn’t, Mars Tom. Ole missis she’d take an’ tar de head off’n me. ’Deed she would.”

8 “SHE! She never licks anybody—whacks ’em over the head with her thimble—and who cares for that, I’d like to know. She talks awful, but talk don’t hurt—anyways it don’t if she don’t cry. Jim, I’ll give you a marvel. I’ll give you a **white alley!**”

9 Jim began to waver.

10 “White alley, Jim! And it’s a bully taw.”

11 “My! Dat’s a mighty gay marvel, I tell you! But Mars Tom I’s powerful ’fraid ole missis—”

12 “And besides, if you will I’ll show you my sore toe.”

13 Jim was only human—this attraction was too much for him. He put down his pail, took the white alley, and bent over the toe with absorbing interest while the bandage was being unwound. In another moment he was flying down the street with his pail and a tingling rear, Tom was whitewashing with **vigor**, and Aunt Polly was retiring from the field with a slipper in her hand and triumph in her eye.

14 But Tom’s energy did not last. He began to think of the fun he had planned for this day, and his sorrows multiplied. Soon the free boys would come tripping along on all sorts of delicious expeditions, and they would make a world of fun of him for having to work—the very thought of it burnt him like fire. He got out his worldly wealth and examined it—bits of toys, marbles, and trash; enough to buy an exchange of WORK, maybe, but not half enough to buy so much as half an hour of pure freedom. So he returned his **straitened** means to his pocket, and gave up the idea of trying to buy the boys. At this dark and hopeless moment an inspiration burst upon him! Nothing less than a great, magnificent inspiration.

Chunk 4

15 He took up his brush and went tranquilly to work. Ben Rogers hove in sight presently—the very boy, of all boys, whose ridicule he had been dreading. Ben’s gait was the hop-skip-and-jump—proof enough that his heart was light and his anticipations high. He was eating an apple, and giving a long, melodious whoop, at intervals, followed by a deep-toned ding-dong-dong, ding-dong-dong, for he was personating a steamboat. As he drew near, he slackened speed, took the middle of the street, leaned far over to starboard and rounded to ponderously and with laborious pomp and circumstance—for he was personating the Big Missouri, and considered himself to be drawing nine feet of water. He was boat and captain and engine-bells combined, so he had to imagine himself standing on his own hurricane-deck giving the orders and executing them:

white alley: a kind of marble
vigor: strength or force
straitened: characterized by poverty



Illustration of Mark Twain's character Tom Sawyer whitewashing a fence. This screen print was created in 1910.

16 “Stop her, sir! Ting-a-ling-ling!” The headway ran almost out, and he drew up slowly toward the sidewalk.

17 “Ship up to back! Ting-a-ling-ling!” His arms straightened and stiffened down his sides.

18 “Set her back on the stabboard! Ting-a-ling-ling! Chow! ch-chow-wow! Chow!” His right hand, mean-time, describing stately circles—for it was representing a forty-foot wheel.

19 “Let her go back on the labboard! Ting-a-ling-ling! Chow-ch-chow-chow!” The left hand began to describe circles.

20 “Stop the stabboard! Ting-a-ling-ling! Stop the labboard! Come ahead on the stabboard! Stop her! Let your outside turn over slow! Ting-a-ling-ling! Chow-ow-ow! Get out that head-line! LIVELY now! Come—out with your spring-line—what’re you about there! Take a turn round that stump with the bight of it! Stand by that stage, now—let her go! Done with the engines, sir! Ting-a-ling-ling! SH’T! S’H’T! SH’T!” (trying the gauge-cocks).

21 Tom went on whitewashing—paid no attention to the steamboat. Ben stared a moment and then said: “Hi-YI! YOU’RE up a stump, ain’t you!”

Chunk 4

22 No answer. Tom surveyed his last touch with the eye of an artist, then he gave his brush another gentle sweep and surveyed the result, as before. Ben ranged up alongside of him. Tom’s mouth watered for the apple, but he stuck to his work. Ben said:

23 “Hello, old chap, you got to work, hey?”

24 Tom wheeled suddenly and said:

25 “Why, it’s you, Ben! I warn’t noticing.”

26 “Say—I’m going in a-swimming, I am. Don’t you wish you could? But of course you’d druther WORK—wouldn’t you? Course you would!”

27 Tom contemplated the boy a bit, and said:

28 “What do you call work?”

29 “Why, ain’t THAT work?”

30 Tom resumed his whitewashing, and answered carelessly:

31 “Well, maybe it is, and maybe it ain’t. All I know, is, it suits Tom Sawyer.”

32 “Oh come, now, you don’t mean to let on that you LIKE it?”

33 The brush continued to move.

34 “Like it? Well, I don’t see why I oughtn’t to like it. Does a boy get a chance to whitewash a fence every day?”

35 That put the thing in a new light. Ben stopped nibbling his apple. Tom swept his brush daintily back and forth—stepped back to note the effect—added a touch here and there—criticized the effect again—Ben watching every move and getting more and more interested, more and more absorbed. Presently he said:

36 “Say, Tom, let ME whitewash a little.”

37 Tom considered, was about to consent; but he altered his mind:

38 “No—no—I reckon it wouldn’t hardly do, Ben. You see, Aunt Polly’s awful particular about this fence—right here on the street, you know—but if it was the back fence I wouldn’t mind and SHE wouldn’t. Yes, she’s awful particular about this fence; it’s got to be done very careful; I reckon there ain’t one boy in a thousand, maybe two thousand, that can do it the way it’s got to be done.”

39 “No—is that so? Oh come, now—lemme just try. Only just a little—I’d let YOU, if you was me, Tom.”

40 “Ben, I’d like to, honest injun; but Aunt Polly—well, Jim wanted to do it, but she wouldn’t let him; Sid wanted to do it, and she wouldn’t let Sid. Now don’t you see how I’m fixed? If you was to tackle this fence and anything was to happen to it—”

41 “Oh, shucks, I’ll be just as careful. Now lemme try. Say—I’ll give you the core of my apple.”

42 “Well, here—No, Ben, now don’t. I’m afeard—”

43 “I’ll give you ALL of it!”

Chunk 6

44 Tom gave up the brush with reluctance in his face, but **alacrity** in his heart. And while the late steamer *Big Missouri* worked and sweated in the sun, the retired artist sat on a barrel in the shade close by, dangled his legs, munched his apple, and planned the slaughter of more innocents. There was no lack of material; boys happened along every little while; they came to jeer, but remained to whitewash. By the time Ben was fagged out, Tom had traded the next chance to Billy Fisher for a kite, in good repair; and when he played out, Johnny Miller bought in for a dead rat and a string to swing it with—and so on, and so on, hour after hour. And when the middle of the afternoon came, from being a poor poverty-stricken boy in the morning, Tom was literally rolling in wealth. He had besides the things before mentioned, twelve marbles, part of a jews-harp, a piece of blue bottle-glass to look through, a spool cannon, a key that wouldn’t unlock anything, a fragment of chalk, a glass stopper of a decanter, a tin soldier, a couple of tadpoles, six fire-crackers, a kitten with only one eye, a brass door-knob, a dog-collar—but no dog—the handle of a knife, four pieces of orange-peel, and a **dilapidated** old window sash.

GRAMMAR & USAGE

Denotation and Connotation

Remember that a word’s **denotation** is its actual meaning. Its **connotation** is the feeling or impression it gives the reader. When Ben enters the fence scene, he’s described as “eating an apple.” The connotation of this description is literal: He is actually eating an apple. But further along, he is described as “nibbling” the apple. The denotation of *nibbling* is “taking small bites.” The use of *nibbling* implies that Ben has become too distracted to eat the apple, so he is taking tiny bites while he thinks. After Ben starts to paint and gives his apple to Tom, Tom “munched” his apple. The word *munched* carries a connotation of joy, so it helps show how happy Tom is with himself.

As you read, look for two more instances where the author has chosen words especially for their connotations.

alacrity: willingness

dilapidated: ruined

Making Observations

- What do you notice about the setting of the novel excerpt?
- What do you notice about the characters in the novel excerpt?

Returning to the Text

- Return to the text as you respond to the following questions. Use text evidence to support your responses.
- Write down any additional questions you have about the novel excerpt.

1. What does the word *reposeful* mean in paragraph 1? What clues in the text help you understand the meaning of the word?

2. What does the word *melancholy* mean in paragraph 2? What clues in the text help you understand the meaning of the word? Use a print or digital resource to determine the word origin of *melancholy*. How has the word's meaning changed over time?

3. One of the notable characteristics of Twain's style is his use of verbals. Examine paragraph 2 and highlight all the verbals.

4. How does Tom try to get Jim to help him in Chunk 3? Why does he fail?

5. How does Twain use steamboat jargon for effect in Chunk 4?

6. Tom tries to manipulate his friends into doing whitewashing for him. How does he change his plan in Chunk 5 after Jim's refusal to help?

7. What is ironic about Tom’s plan to get out of whitewashing the fence?

8. What is the intended effect of listing Tom’s “treasures” in such great detail in paragraph 44? What does the audience understand about the value of these things that is different from Tom’s point of view?

Working from the Text

9. Review the definition of **dialect**. Return to the text and place a “D” by examples of dialect. Then try to paraphrase a few lines of dialogue in My Notes.
10. Look back at the examples of dialect that you marked and compare them to your paraphrases. Think about how the story would be different if the author had not used dialect for the character. Then explain the effect of dialect on the excerpt.

LITERARY

Dialect is a regional or social variety of a language distinguished by pronunciation, grammar, or vocabulary. This section of the story includes a depiction of Tom’s and Jim’s dialects.