LITERATUR, DIE ANKOMMT

Tom Sawyer

Reading edition

The fence: making work desirable

Meet Tom and Ben in the fence scene and explore the narrator’s commentary. The text is reproduced unchanged from the English reading edition.

SELECTED MATERIALS · INTERNATIONAL ENGLISH

Secondary education · English as the main language of schooling
Trial edition 1.3 · October 2026

Pages included

02 · Reading edition: pages 15, 16, 17, 18.

Original page numbers and references to the complete documents are retained. This selection does not replace the full teaching package. Source pages are reproduced unchanged; only this introductory page has been added.

Explore the complete teaching package

Access for a classroom trial is arranged individually with Edwin Zschaler. The website presents selected materials; timing and conditions of use are agreed when you make contact.

Saturday morning dawned. The whole summer world outside was bright and sunny, full of life and movement. Music seemed to ring and sing in every heart, and if the heart was young, the tune suddenly found its way to the lips. Joy and pleasure shone in every face; every step had wings. The acacias[1] were in blossom, filling the air with their delicious scent.

Tom appeared with a bucket of whitewash[2] and a long-handled brush. He stood before the fence, surveyed the field of his future labours, and all the joy seemed to vanish from nature at a stroke. Deep gloom seized his apprehensive spirit. The wretched fence was thirty metres long and nine feet high! Life seemed dreary, existence a burden. With a sigh he dipped the brush and swept it over the top plank, repeating the manoeuvre once, then once again. He compared the tiny whitewashed patch with the enormous expanse of untouched fence and sank, discouraged, onto some gnarled tree roots.

Jim, the Black boy enslaved in Aunt Polly's household[3], came singing and skipping through the yard gate, a wooden bucket in his hand. Until now Tom had thoroughly hated fetching water from the village pump. At this moment it seemed the greatest pleasure imaginable. He remembered that there was always company there: white children, Black children and children of mixed heritage waited for their turn. Meanwhile they rested, bargained and traded, quarrelled, wrestled, fought and passed the time in all sorts of ways. And Jim never returned with his bucket of water in less than an hour, although the pump was barely a few hundred paces from the house. Even then someone usually had to be sent after him. So Tom called:

"Listen, Jim. I'll fetch the water, and you can do a bit of painting here."

"Can't do that, young Master Tom. The old aunt told Jim to do nothing but fetch water and not to paint on any account. She said young Master Tom might ask Jim if he wanted to paint, but Jim mustn't do it. Not on any account."

"Oh, Jim, don't let her tell you that. She always talks that way. Give me the bucket. I'll be straight back. She won't even notice."

"Jim's so scared, he doesn't want to do it. The old aunt says she'll tear his head off if he does."

"Her? Oh, goodness, she can't give anyone a proper beating. She just brushes her hand over your head, as though she was stroking it. Who minds that? Yes, she talks about beatings and everything, but talk doesn't hurt—as long as she doesn't cry with it. Look, Jim. I'll give you a big marble. And a piece of rubber as well!"

Jim hesitated.

"A piece of rubber, Jim—and what a piece! Look!"

"Oh, goodness! That's a fine piece of rubber. But Jim's terribly scared of the old aunt!"

Jim, however, was only human, and the temptation proved too strong for his weakness. He put down the bucket and reached for the enticing rubber. The

1 Acacias: trees with fragrant flowers; in central Europe this name often refers to robinia trees, or false acacias.

2 Whitewash: a thin, usually white lime mixture used to paint walls or fences.

3 Jim is enslaved in the story. His portrayal and way of speaking reflect the racism of the period in which it is set.

next moment he was running down the street with his bucket, howling loudly. Tom was whitewashing with heroic disregard for death, and Aunt Polly withdrew proudly from the battlefield, slipper in hand and triumph in her eyes.

Tom's zeal did not last long. He remembered all the wonderful things he had planned for the day, and his misery grew and grew. Soon the happy boys who were free today would come swarming past him, bound for the hills, the woods, the river—anywhere lovely and delightful. And how they would jeer, laugh and mock him for having to stay and work! The very thought burned like fire.

He emptied his pockets and surveyed his possessions: old feathers, glass and stone marbles, tokens and all sorts of other rubbish. Perhaps there was enough to arrange an exchange of jobs, but never to buy even a scant half-hour of freedom. With a sigh he put his limited resources back into his pocket, and Tom had to abandon the idea of bribing one or another of the boys to help him. In this dark, hopeless moment, inspiration came. A great, glorious inspiration! He picked up his brush again and set quietly and diligently to work.

Then Ben Rogers appeared in the distance—Ben Rogers, whose mockery Tom had feared most of all. Ben came along at a little hopping, skipping trot, clear proof that his heart was light and his expectations high. He bit happily into an apple, and every few moments gave a long, musical howl. Each time it was followed by a deep, drawn-out ding-dong-dang, ding-dong-dang. Ben was playing a steamboat. As he approached Tom, he went to half steam, kept to the middle of the road, turned hard to starboard[4] and glided in a proud arc towards the bank.

He did this with every imaginable flourish and complication, for he was nothing less than the "Great Missouri", drawing nine feet of water[5]. He was ship, captain, crew, steam engine and bell in one. Standing on his own bridge, he gave orders and immediately carried them out himself.

"Stop! Ting-a-ling-a-ling."

The main road ended, and the steamboat turned slowly towards the side road.

"Turn! Ting-a-ling-a-ling!"

Ben let his arms drop stiffly to his sides.

"Turn, starboard! Ting-a-ling-a-ling! Chuff-chuff-choo-oo-choo!"

Now his right arm described great circles, representing a forty-foot paddle wheel.

"Back, port! Ting-a-ling-a-ling! Chuff-chuff-choo-oo-chuff! Stop starboard! Forward, boys! Anchor up—down! Ting-a-ling! Chuff-choo-chuff! Go! Stop engines! Hey, you there! Shh-shh-shh!"

(Escaping steam.)

All this time Tom went on whitewashing and left the steamboat to itself. Ben stared at him for a moment, then grinned:

"Hee-hee! Stuck here, are you?"

No answer. Tom appeared to study his last stroke with an artist's eye. Then he gently brushed over it once more and again examined the result critically. Ben

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4 Starboard and port: the right and left sides of a ship respectively, when facing forwards.

5 Drawing nine feet of water: the ship's draught, the depth to which it sits in the water, is nine feet.

marched alongside him. Tom’s mouth watered at the sight of the apple, but he bravely stuck to his work. Then Ben said:

“Hello, old boy! Working as a punishment, eh?”

“Oh, is that you, Ben? I wasn’t paying attention!”

“Listen, I’m going swimming. Want to come? But I suppose you’d rather work. You’d much rather stay here, wouldn’t you?”

Tom looked him up and down in surprise.

“What do you call work, exactly?”

“W-what? Isn’t that work?”

Tom dipped his brush again and said indifferently:

“Maybe—maybe not. All I know is, it suits Tom Sawyer.”

“Now, you’re not going to tell me you’re doing that for fun?”

The brush went back and forth.

“For fun? Well, I don’t see why not. Do you get to paint a fence every day?”

That put the matter in a completely new light. Ben thought it over, nibbling his apple. Tom moved the brush slowly back and forth, stepped back to examine the effect, touched up a bit here and there, and examined it again—all without paying Ben the slightest attention. Ben followed every movement with growing eagerness and increasing interest. Suddenly he said:

“Tom, let me do a bit of painting!”

Tom considered, seemed about to give in, then dismissed the idea again.

“No, no, that won’t do, Ben. It really won’t. You see, Aunt Polly’s especially particular about this fence, because it’s right by the street. Now, if it was somewhere round the back, it wouldn’t matter so much—to her or me. But here! She’s terribly particular about this fence. It has to be painted with special care. One boy in a hundred, maybe fewer, can do it the way it needs to be done.”

“Really? Come on, Tom, let me try. Just a tiny bit. I’d let you paint, Tom, if it was my job!”

“Ben, honestly, I’d like to, but Aunt Polly … Jim wanted to do it, and Sid too, but neither was allowed. Can’t you see what a fix I’m in? Suppose you paint it and something happens and the fence is spoiled, then …”

“Oh, nonsense! I’ll do it properly. Here, wait. You can have the rest of my apple too. It’s only the core now, but there’s still some apple left on it.”

“Well, go on, then! No, Ben, better not after all. I’m afraid you …”

“Here, I’ll give you a whole apple as well!”

Tom handed over the brush, reluctance on his face and joy in his heart. While the former steamboat “Great Missouri” painted on, bathed in sweat, the retired artist sat on a little barrel in the shade, dangling his legs, devouring his apple and pondering how to lure more victims into his net.

There was no shortage of material. Boys came past in droves. They came to mock and stayed to paint. By the time Ben was tired, Tom had already struck a bargain with Billy Fischer: Billy gave him an almost new kite with only a few patches. Then Johnny Miller paid with a dead rat attached to a string, which could be swung back and forth. And so it went on, hour after hour.

By the middle of the afternoon, Tom, the poor boy with empty pockets and empty hands, had become a fortunate fellow positively wallowing in wealth. Besides the things I have already mentioned, he now owned twelve stone marbles, a rather damaged harmonica, a piece of blue glass to view the world through, half a blowpipe, an old key that opened nothing, a piece of chalk, a half-broken glass stopper from a water bottle, a lead soldier, a piece of rope, six percussion caps[6], a young kitten with only one eye, an old brass door handle, a dog collar without a dog, a knife blade, four pieces of orange peel and an old, rickety piece of window frame. He was in excellent spirits besides, had needed to make no further effort all that time, and had almost more company than he wanted. The fence had received no fewer than three complete coats. If the bucket had not run out of whitewash, Tom might have bankrupted every last boy in the village.

The world no longer seemed so sad and dreary to our Tom. Without knowing it, he had discovered a law deeply rooted in human nature, one that drives a great many actions. To make someone want something—whether that person is grown up or not, for age makes no difference—you only have to make it seem difficult to obtain.

Had Tom been a great and experienced philosopher, such as the author of this book, he would have learnt from this that work is simply what one has to do; pleasure is what one does willingly. He would have understood why making artificial flowers or walking in a treadmill[7] is called “work”, while playing skittles until the sweat drips from you, or climbing Mont Blanc, counts merely as pleasure. Yes, indeed—who can explain these contradictions of human nature?

6 Percussion caps: small ignition caps formerly used, for example, in firearms.

7 Treadmill: a large wheel that people or animals had to turn by walking in it.