

WHITE WASHING THE FENCE

STUDY NOTE

Tom always wants what he does not have, even seeing the chores of others as preferable to his. In trying to get what he wants, Tom doesn't worry about how he might get Jim into trouble. Yet Tom isn't mean-spirited towards Jim, however, while Aunt Polly is. She hits Jim in her frustration with both Tom and Jim. Her harshness towards Jim makes clear the cruelty endured by blacks in St. Petersburg.

Play-acting is another shared activity of boyhood that Tom engages in with his friends. While friends with most of the boys, Tom is also more clever than them. He realizes that he's not alone in wanting what he does not have, and manages to make his difficult chore look like a privilege to Ben Rogers.

Tom does not share his newfound wisdom as a moral lesson to Ben, and instead uses it to further exploit his other friends. Tom has discovered the useful business model of many a wealthy adult: make others work for you in exchange for invented notions of wealth and privilege.

One of the most prominent scenes in the book was the “fence scene”, where Tom Sawyer was tasked by his Aunt Polly to whitewash their fence as a punishment for a prior mischief. Tom Sawyer, being young, wished he could play instead, naturally. Ben Rogers, one of his friends saw him doing this job and did his best to ridicule the boy for his penance.

Most people would bow their heads and take it in the chin. But Tom Sawyer not only turned the situation around, he spun it like a top on his palm. At the end of that day, a dozen boys painted the fence for him while he played to his heart’s desire. Here’s the kicker, they even paid him in kind for the privilege.

But how did he do it?

Punishment To Privilege

“Work consists of whatever a body is obliged to do. Play consists of whatever a body is not obliged to do.” — Mark Twain

Here’s how Tom Sawyer did it.

Ben Rogers was playing around Tom when he commented about Tom’s work. Tom simply asked, “what work?” and proceeded to paint the fence with careful precision, checking the application of the paint every stroke of his brush. Ben,

curious, lamented why Tom was not tressed about his situation. Tom simply said, “I don’t see why I would be, you don’t get to do this everyday” acting as if he were doing a very difficult task.

At this point, because of Tom’s seemingly dedicated poise, Ben has gotten confused, yet completely absorbed in the work Tom was doing. Ben couldn’t help himself but ask, “Say Tom, let me paint a little”. Tom Sawyer refused but grinned. This is when he knew that his trick has worked.

He continued the act and spoke lines like “Only one in a thousand, maybe even two thousand boys can do this” and “Aunt Polly said this is so important only Tom Sawyer can do it”, which of course, she didn’t say. Ben couldn’t resist to have a go at this important calling, and offered his apple to Tom in exchange for the chance.

Changing your Tomorrow