

In the Old Graveyard

by Mark Twain *from The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*

The Adventures of Tom Sawyer is the story of Tom, an orphan boy living with his aunt in Missouri in the mid-1800s. Tom is a little wild and full of mischief, but his friend Huckleberry Finn is more wild and more mischievous. In the passage, Tom and Huck sneak out late at night to go to a graveyard in order to test a cure for Huck's warts on his hands.

It was a graveyard of the old-fashioned Western kind. It was on a hill, about a mile and a half from the village. It had a crazy board fence around it, which leaned inward in places, and outward the rest of the time, but stood upright nowhere. Grass and weeds grew rank over the whole cemetery. All the old graves were sunken in, there was not a tombstone on the place; round-topped, worm-eaten boards staggered over the graves, leaning for support and finding none. "Sacred to the memory of" So-and-So had been painted on them once, but it could no longer have been read, on the most of them, now, even if there had been light.

A faint wind moaned through the trees, and Tom feared it might be the spirits of the dead, complaining at being disturbed. The boys talked little, and only under their breath, for the time and the place and the pervading solemnity and silence oppressed their spirits. They found the sharp new heap they were seeking, and ensconced themselves within the protection of three great elms that grew in a bunch within a few feet of the grave.

Then they waited in silence for what seemed a long time. The hooting of a distant owl was all the sound that troubled the dead stillness. Tom's reflections grew oppressive. He must force some talk.

Questions

1. The graveyard that Twain describes is in a state of disrepair. Give a quotation from the passage that supports this.

2. Give an example of personification in the passage.

3. What does “reflections” mean in the passage?

4. Why does Tom feel he needs to “force some talk”?

Vocabulary List

Each of the vocabulary words below are used in the reading passage. As you read the passage, pay attention to context clues that suggest the word's meaning.

1. staggered
2. pervading
3. solemnity
4. ensconced
5. oppressive

Context Clues

Using context clues from the sentences in the passage, underline the correct meaning of the word in boldface.

1) “round-topped, worm-eaten boards **staggered** over the graves”

- a. towered; soared b. laid flat c. in a zigzag pattern; not lined up d. rotted; decayed

2) “the **pervading** solemnity and silence oppressed their spirits”

- a. filling completely; penetrating b. gross; ugly c. unexpected or startling d. gentle; easy

3) “the pervading **solemnity** and silence oppressed their spirits”

- a. stink or odor b. darkness; gloom c. wind or breeze d. seriousness; quiet dignity

4) “They found the sharp new heap they were seeking, and **ensconced** themselves within the protection of three great elms”

- a. uncovered; revealed b. galloped or ran c. settled or established d. threw; flung

5) “Tom’s reflections grew **oppressive**.”

- a. faint; dim b. heavy or depressing c. encouraging d. optimistic or hopeful