Extra/alternate activity: “Pretentious Writing”

1. Over the next few minutes, read and react to the following paragraph. Does it represent good writing? Why or why not?

It was a crisp and spicy New England morning in early October. The lilacs and laburnums, lit with the glory fires of autumn, hung burning and flashing in the brilliant air, a fairy bridge provided by kind Nature for the wingless wild things that have their homes in the treetops and would visit together. The larch and the pomegranate flung their purple and yellow flames in broad splashes along the slanting westward sweep of the woodland; and the sensuous fragrance of innumerable deciduous flowers rose upon the atmosphere in swoon of incense. Far in the empty sky, a solitary pharynx slept among the empyrean on motionless wing. And everywhere brooded stillness, serenity, and the peace of God.

2. Discuss: This paragraph is deliberate nonsense. Mark Twain wrote it for a young, pretentious would-be writer to show that what may sound impressive or “artistic” can be meaningless. The paragraph is a spoof and a hoax. Among its problems are

- **Lilacs:** bloom only in early spring, in fall, the bushes are dusky green
- **Laburnum:** a Eurasian variety of poisonous shrub, not found in the North Temperate Zone of the United States
- **Wingless wild things:** Monkeys? Squirrels? Ostriches? A “bridge” hanging over plants?
- **Larch:** has short, pinelike leaves in bunches, generally a bluish green.
- **Pomegranates:** usually found in hot, arid regions; leaves are bright green, flowers are orange-red, berries are red. “Purple and yellow”?
- **Fling a flame:** How? Left-handed? In splashes? How do you fling a flame that splashes?
- **Deciduous flowers:** All flowers are deciduous!
- **Swoon:** a fainting fit or attack
- **Pharynx:** the part of the alimentary canal between the mouth and the esophagus. What’s it doing in the sky?