
Why the Adventures of Huckleberry Finn Should Be in the List of Required Reading

Mark Twain's satiric masterwork *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* has, over time, manifested itself as a novel of pronounced controversy proportionate to its tremendous literary worth. The story of an "uncivilized" Southern boy and the intrigues involved as he aids Jim, a runaway slave, in attaining freedom by traveling up the Mississippi River, *Huckleberry Finn* is, in the American literary world, more paradoxical for the extreme controversy it generates than for the intricacies of the novel itself. From the date it was first published, detractors have crowned *Huckleberry Finn* the most ignoble of offensive works, while supporters such as Ernest Hemingway have hailed it as the book that "all modern American literature comes from" (Hemingway, qtd. in Strauss).

At first glance, objectors of Samuel Clemens' novel appear to engage in a simplistic level of discourse. Parents, teachers, and likeminded individuals have historically protested the novel over the racism inherent to the material presented. Those concerned with matters of race find reason to ban the book over the word "nigger," which appears in the text over 200 times. Such detractors claim that because of the overt racism presented, the novel enhances racial tension, makes black students uncomfortable, and can corrupt impressionable minds. Further, some have found the book to simply be a coarse story. Crusaders involved in one of the earliest bans on *Huck Finn*, undertaken by the Concord [Massachusetts] Public Library committee, labeled the book "rough, coarse and inelegant, dealing with a series of experiences not elevating," and "the veriest trash" ("Concord").

Such basic criticism of *Huck Finn* typically draws from a one-dimensional reading of the work. The character of Jim is most immediately portrayed as a stereotypically unintelligent, grotesque figure, and the novel itself ends with his capture and reenslavement. Huck, a naive boy with no morality other than the flawed, inculcated Southern mores he takes for granted, narrates the story from a nearly-unwaveringly simple perspective. It is no surprise that this novel has been taken at face value as a bleak commentary about race relations in the 1800s with overwhelmingly racist overtones.

Even the most obdurate or obtuse of Twain critics, however, are able to grasp the basic elements of satire, sarcasm, and irony apparent in *Huck Finn*. Twain, an ardent abolitionist and humanitarian in spite of his temporal atmosphere, which was deeply rooted in Southern culture and beliefs, clearly did not intend to dehumanize blacks by portraying a sardonic reality any more than Jonathan Swift intended to advocate infanticide.

Need help with the assignment?

Our professionals are ready to assist with any writing!

[GET HELP](#)

Indeed, the true controversy surrounding Twain's novel does not lie simply within an objection lodged over such an incredibly basic and cynical view of the work. There exists a much stronger intellectual concern that finds itself at the heart of a modern controversy over how we, as students, educators, and people, should view, read, revere, or not revere works of literature. In addition, the debate extends to what is to be considered part of the distinguished canon of "great literature," a distinction even most modern detractors would concede to Huck Finn.

On one side of this conflict are traditionalists, or formalists, who maintain that the point of literature, as anecdotally paraphrased by Gerald Graff, "is to rise above such local and transitory problems by transmuting them into universal structures of language and image" (Graff). These individuals reject subjective criticism of a work of literature based on its ethical message. Instead, they believe that a work's value and literary merit is based on an objective analysis of the work's value as "art," which relates to a work's ability to describe, consider, or enlighten the human condition and a work's compositional worth. By that standard, a work of literature cannot be appraised for the limitations of the time period it derives from any more than "King Kong" could be considered an inferior film for its lack of computer-generated special effects or "Casablanca" for its lack of color.

Traditionalists fully reject ethical deliberation of literature and especially ethical censorship. To them, it is unfair to judge, simply, the Iliad for its reliance on myth, Lolita for its overt sexual situations, or the "Communist Manifesto" for its espousal of a radical doctrine. These works, traditionalists argue, have merit wholly independent of what incorrect, anachronous, or "unacceptable" beliefs or themes the works seem to advocate. Instead, their worth is contingent upon their capacity to transcend such temporal constraints, a capacity that happens to be extremely debatable for any work of poetry or prose.

The traditionalists, for the most part, believe in a separation of literature and its physical effects. Since words have a worth separate from one's reaction to their meaning and, ultimately, separate from their effect on the world, a demarcation between words and their "real" consequences must exist. Wayne Booth of the University of California summarized this position thus:

We had been trained to treat a "poem as poem and not another thing" and to believe that the value of a great work of fiction was something much subtler than any idea or proposition derived from it or used to paraphrase its "meaning." We knew that sophisticated critics never judge a fiction by any effect it might have on readers. "Poetry," we were fond of quoting to each other, "makes nothing happen," and we included under "poetry" all prose works that qualified as "genuine literature." (Booth 4)

Opponents to the traditional view focus on specific thematic and ethical messages within works

Need help with the assignment?

Our professionals are ready to assist with any writing!

GET HELP

of literature in their analyses. Among their ranks are Marxist critics, who appraise a work based on the class statuses and socioeconomic motives of various characters; feminist critics, who heavily analyze gender roles and conditions in literature; and racial critics, who generally look at a work's treatment of racial boundaries. These individuals actively examine the ethical messages of novels and consider how works of literature affect readers by this message.

Certainly, this controversy is at the heart of the controversy surrounding *Huckleberry Finn*. If all readers saw this book purely in the traditionalist's view, there would be no objection whatsoever, as the debasement of Jim is irrelevant to the literary merit of the novel.

However, viewing *Huck Finn* on the basis of its ethical message places it, to the reader sensitive to racial issues, on nearly the same level of *Mein Kampf*. In spite of Mark Twain's own beliefs and intentions, the character of Jim is nevertheless nothing more than a function of the period from which he is derived. He is a polarizing racial figure, one whose plight and existence within the story hearkens back to outdated, stereotypical roles of blacks. In spite of his position as a friend to Huck, Jim fails to transcend this racial boundary, his position as an unfree human being serving only to help qualify Huck's own freedom and cultivate Huck's own morality and sense of civilization.

Various writings serve to bolster this appraisal of the character of Jim. Noted black author Ralph Ellison agreed that Jim was a human character with a strong sense of morality and dignity, yet likens him to a minstrel in blackface, noting that "Jim's friendship for Huck comes across as that of a boy for another boy" (Ellison 422). Ethnic author Toni Morrison attests to the necessity of Jim's position of inferiority:

The representation of Jim as the visible other can be read as the yearning of whites for forgiveness and love, but the yearning is made possible only when it is understood that Jim has recognized his inferiority (not as slave, but as black) and despises it. Jim permits his persecutors to torment him, and responds to the torment and humiliation with boundless love. The humiliation that Huck and Tom subject Jim to is baroque, endless, foolish, mind-softening - and it comes after we have experienced Jim as an adult, a caring father, and a sensitive man. [...] Jim's slave status makes play and deferment possible - but it also dramatizes, in style and mode of narration, the connection between slavery and the achievement (in actual and imaginary terms) of freedom. Jim seems unassertive, loving, irrational, passionate, dependent, inarticulate[.] It is not what Jim seems that warrants inquiry, but what Mark Twain, Huck, and especially Tom need from him that should solicit our attention. (Morrison 56-57)

On this basis, the strongest, firmest reaction against *Huck Finn* is formed. Wayne Booth paraphrases Paul Moses, a black art professor at the University of Chicago who articulated the rage some feel over the basis of this novel:

Need help with the assignment?

Our professionals are ready to assist with any writing!

GET HELP

I don't think it's right to subject students, black or white, to the many distorted views of race on which that book is based. No, it's not the word "nigger" I'm objecting to, it's the whole range of assumptions about slavery and its consequences, and about how whites should deal with liberated slaves, and how liberated slaves should behave or will behave towards whites, good ones and bad ones. That book is just bad education, and the fact that it's so cleverly written makes it even more troublesome to me. (Booth, 3)

The basic controversy presented is a matter that will not be resolved definitively anytime in the foreseeable future; both parties have a strong position that will not be subverted through intellectual chicanery by any means. For this reason alone, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* most certainly must be required reading in an 11th grade American literature class.

Indeed, it is ironic and perhaps paradoxical that the very controversy over whether or not a novel should be taught is the reason why it must be taught. Yet it is preposterous to pass up the opportunity to introduce students to such an engaging, modern debate about literature. The controversy between traditionalists and non-traditionalists rages in academic halls around the world, and all students of higher literature become engrossed in it at some point in their studies. Traditional and non-traditional interpretations are both solid mainstays of modern literary criticism. Students must be introduced to them during their later high school years.

This obviously begs the question of why we must teach *Huck Finn* in particular to exemplify this debate. Certainly, feminist, Marxist, and ethnic interpretations can be made of practically any work of literature, from *Antigone's* gender-minded defiance to the socioeconomic impulsion of *Winston Smith*. However, *Huck Finn* is a novel that is indispensable to any serious consideration of Southern culture or the plight of blacks in American history. It is a novel whose messages, to some, are incredibly polarizing. It is a work directly at the center of the traditionalist controversy. It is, in all of literature, perhaps one of the bravest, most deliberate, most powerfully-written novels dealing with race, particularly due to Twain's intent, at the outset, to create a work of satire, coating his story and message with layers of irony and obscuring it with a thickly accented narrative. Writing in consideration of another author's interpretation of the novel, Ralph Ellison states with surety, "Surely for literature there is some rare richness here" (Ellison 422).

That argument notwithstanding, simply for being a well-written piece of literature, a thorough, exemplary masterwork of one of America's greatest writing minds, and a telling historical piece, *Huck Finn* earns the right to be taught. It is nothing less than an "essential text" of our "cultural history" (Rich), one that is unparalleled and totally unique in its treatment of race, consideration of the South, analysis of morality, and employment of critical satire. Kevin J. Barr, chair of the English department at Georgetown Day School, contends that Twain's was "a most lyrical voice," and, "[a]rguably," that there are "passages in '*Huckleberry Finn*' that rival Shakespeare

Need help with the assignment?

Our professionals are ready to assist with any writing!

[GET HELP](#)

in their power and beauty" (Barr). It is no overstatement to claim that this novel is integral to any thorough American history, world literature, ethics, or racial studies curriculum. To attempt to teach any other surrogate work of these themes in the place of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* would be tantamount to placing the gilded carriage from which "all modern American literature comes from" (Hemingway, qtd. in Strauss) in front of the horse.

Works Cited

Barr, Kevin J. "The Teaching of 'Huckleberry Finn.'" *Washington Post* 25 March 1995: A17.

Booth, Wayne. *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988.

Britt, Donna. "On Race." *Washington Post*: B1, B7. "The Concord Public Library committee has decided to exclude Mark Twain's latest book." *Boston Transcript* 17 March, 1885.

Ellison, Ralph. "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke." *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn: An Authoritative Text, Backgrounds and Sources, Criticism*. New York: W.W. Norton and Company. 421-422.

Graff, Gerald. "Debate the Canon in Class." *New Literary History*: Autumn 1990.

Morrison, Toni. *Playing in the Dark*. New York: Vintage Books, 1992.

Rich, Frank. "Dropping the N-Bomb." *New York Times* 16 March 1995: 5.

Trilling, Lionel. "The Greatness of Huckleberry Finn." Introduction. *Huckleberry Finn*. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1948. 323-324.

Yardley, Jonathan. "Huck Finn and the Ebb and Flow of Controversy." *Washington Post* 13 March 1995.

Need help with the assignment?

Our professionals are ready to assist with any writing!

GET HELP