

‘Why Can’t You Behave, Huckleberry?’
Sivilizing the *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*

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Who cares about *Huckleberry Finn*?

It seems like almost everyone agrees it’s a classic, and deserves to be considered part of the canon of American literature. From 1885 ink-stained newspapers to yesterday’s blogs, reviewers have praised it. Literally thousands of scholarly publications (not to mention anonymous, unpublished hoards of high-school teachers) have hailed it as a masterpiece and exhaustively examined every detail of plot and every nuance of style, and copious publication of literary criticism continues.

Everyone knows about it. Seventh graders read parts of it in anthologies. Eleventh graders read it as part of their required course in canonical American Literature, often in a single paperback volume bound together with *Scarlet Letter*, *Billy Budd*, and *Red Badge of Courage*. Undergraduates read it as part of the Common Core Curriculum, and graduate students study it intensively in seminars and present papers about it at conferences.

Everyone seems to have read it and loved it. In 1985, on the centennial of its publication, the NEH surveyed teachers about what they thought should be taught in American High schools. *Huckleberry Finn* was the first book named, after “Shakespeare” and “American historical documents” (Leonard 1). According to John Gerber in his introduction to the collection of essays *One Hundred Years of Huckleberry Finn*, about half of college freshmen say they’ve read it, and so do about a third of people who are no longer in school. Many, however, confuse it with *Tom Sawyer*, mixing up incidents and characters from the two novels. Most people remember it as “an adventure story, as escape reading, and as a reminder of their own youth and America’s past” (4).

And yet . . .

Since immediately after its publication, it has been condemned for various reasons. As soon as it was published, a Boston newspaper reported that the Concord Public Library had banned it from their collection as irreverent filth that would surely entice young readers into a life of disrepute and dissolution (Kaplan 11)¹. Since then, an uninterrupted string of protests and attempts to expel *Huckleberry Finn* from schools and libraries has ensued: sometimes on the grounds that the novel encourages children to misbehave, sometimes on the basis that it’s obsolete and sometimes with the argument that it’s just not very well written (Leonard 2).

And yet . . .

The book is offensive to many African-Americans, and, really, to anyone who recognizes racism. As Peaches Henry notes, the desegregation of schools, and the increasing diversity of classrooms, was simultaneous with Trilling and Eliot’s canonization of *Huckleberry Finn*:

In the faces of these children of the revolution, Huck met the group that was to become his most persistent and formidable foe. For while the objections of the Gilded Age, of fundamentalist religious factions, and of unreconstructed southerners had seemed laughable and transitory, the indignation of black students

¹ Kaplan comments that Twain responded “That will sell me 25,000 copies for sure.”

and their parents at the portrayal of blacks in *Huckleberry Finn* was not at all comical and has not been short-lived. (29)

This “foe” is important because *Huckleberry Finn* is ubiquitous in public education, and almost equally ubiquitous are reports of attempts to remove, and actual removals of, the book from required reading lists, classrooms, and libraries. Kaplan lists a few examples: the NAACP condemned it in 1957; in 1982, an official at Mark Twain Intermediate School (Wallace, unnamed by Kaplan) objected to it. In 1984, the school district in Waukegan, Illinois removed it from their required reading list. The frequency of objections to the novel and calls for its removal are so numerous that to list them all would take up too much space in this short paper.

These demands are not without justification. “Classic though it may be,” Leonard and Tenney explain, “there are undeniable obstacles to appreciating the novel” (2). Not only the pervasive repetition of ugly word itself, but racial stereotypes, the minstrel-show quality of Twain’s portrayal of Jim, and, for many readers, the “‘eye-dialect’ which pretends to represent non-standardness by variant spellings” but actually “exaggerates the ignorance and /or deviance of black speakers as compared to white” (5).²

Assertions of the racism inherent in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* also began to appear in scholarly publications. “The fact that people from Texas to Iowa to Illinois to Pennsylvania to Florida to Virginia to New York City concur with [John H.] Wallace’s assessment of *Huck Finn* [as “the most grotesque example of racist trash ever written” (Wallace 16)] demands the attention of the academic community,” writes Henry. “To condemn concerns about the novel as the misguided rantings of ‘know-nothings and noise makers’ is no longer valid or profitable; nor can the invocation of Huck’s immunity under the protectorate of “classic” suffice” (Henry 27).

Many readers and scholars point to the ending of the novel as an example of Twain’s racism. Jim’s capture, the return of Tom Sawyer to the story, the ridiculous and dangerous shenanigans Tom and Huck put him through, Jim’s (and Huck’s) acquiescence to Tom, and Tom’s secrecy about Jim’s true legal status are all problematic. So are Huck’s refusal to return ‘home,’ his skipping out on his responsibilities and impending adulthood, and his return to the profound loneliness he reveals at the beginning of the novel. Of concern, also, is Jim’s tenuous position at then end: will he, really, ever be able to work, earn wages, and free his family? Yet another problem with the ending, arising from racism, is the implicit recognition that Huck and Jim are hopelessly unable to continue their relationship now that they are no longer on the River.

In the oral delivery of this paper, I paused here for a moment to explain that I am NOT going to say ‘that word.’ I explained that when I came to it in a quote from one of my sources, I would simply pause silently for a second. I explained that I agree with W.E.B. Du Bois, and all my African-American friends and students, that ‘that’ word is “the word which no white man may use” (Leonard 6).³ Also, I explained, I was doing this as a deliberate strategy: I wanted the conference attendees to fill in the gap themselves. I wanted them to hear the word inside their

²Shelley Fisher Fishkin’s claim that Mark Twain patterned Huck’s speech on that of an African-American boy he had met, and the evidence she brings to support that claim, were revolutionary. However, Quirk notes that Fishkin’s suggestion that Huck’s voice is really an African-American voice “is likely to be embraced as an idea congenial to those who like the novel but feel somewhat uncomfortable in their admiration.” Rather than being “narrated by the son of Pap Finn,” the novel can be seen as being narrated by “a construction of many American voices and therefore . . . politically correct” Thus, Fishkin’s “notion may obviate many of the difficulties teachers face.” Quirk notes that this is a “no-lose situation” which is very appealing to teachers because they can simultaneously continue to keep Twain in the canon and also satisfy their desire to “advance notions of multi-cultural education” (151).

³ Du Bois, “The Humor of Negroes,” *Mark Twain Quarterly* 5.3 (Fall-Winter 1942-43): 1.

own heads. I admit that was a gimmick, but I think it was important. In writing, however, I will faithfully and accurately quote other people's writing, but I will not use the word in my own.

Today, and for decades, as noted by Leonard and Tenney, among many others, the debate over *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* "has focused most often on its pervasive use of the word 'nigger' and its arguably disparaging portrayal of the slave Jim and other black characters" (2). This word was as offensive at the time of writing as it is now. And not only the ignorant, evil characters in the novel use it (if only they conveniently did, we could possibly excuse Twain's work as ironically anti-racist). But everybody uses it, including the doctor paying a "compliment" to Jim, including all the people Huck admires, and including Huck himself, who "though disarmingly lovable in many ways, is contaminated by the racism of his time and region; to the last chapter in the book he uses 'nigger,' long after rejecting most of the clichéd notions the word represents" (Leonard 7) Incidentally, the word is used only five times in *Tom Sawyer*: by each of the boys in two separate conversations between Huck and Tom, and once by Injun Joe. The third person narrator doesn't use it, and neither does anyone else.

What do we do with Huckleberry in 2011?

Do we teach the *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* in high school, save it for college, or not teach it at all? I teach dual credit composition (the two semesters of composition required by most colleges and universities, which Houston Community College offers to high school students as a kind of distance learning at high school campuses). My students are simultaneously college freshmen and high school seniors. Almost all of them read it last year in junior English. I asked them, "Should *Huckleberry Finn* be taught in high schools?" Half of them argued pretty loudly that it should. If you don't require it in high school, they said, a lot of people will never read it because most Americans don't go to college, and not all college students take literature courses. No one, they said, would pick it up and read it themselves. The equally vociferous other half claimed that it would be better to wait to teach it until college, because, they said, "high school teachers don't let you think for yourself." They complained that they had to read it very quickly, and there was little or no discussion of the novel beyond "what was on the AP (Advanced Placement) exam. The ones who read *Huckleberry Finn* in regular, not AP, junior English classes honestly didn't remember much about it.

Should *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* be banned? Or bowdlerized?

In January of this year, suddenly Huckleberry was in the news: radio, TV, newspapers, all ran stories about the 126-year old book. That's one reason *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is so important: it's not just an academic, theoretical matter; it's also in the public sphere, and a matter of public debate.

Alan Gribben has edited a new version of *Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn*, published by NewSouth Books in February 2011, in which he replaced all the 'n-words' with 'slave' and 'Injun Joe' with 'Indian Joe.' He's not the first to do this: many editions of the novel, intended for young readers, have been abbreviated and bowdlerized. John H. Wallace self-published one in the 1980s, marketed to school districts. Wallace and Gribben both justify their editions in the same way: the words are extremely offensive, and their deletions and replacements will make the books more appealing to more students. Besides, claim both Wallace and Gribben, the original versions of Twain's works are still widely available.

The first news item I saw was Leonard Pitt Jr.'s editorial, which appeared in the *Houston Chronicle* January 9. Pitts remarked that this is a "troubling change," and that while he recognizes that "Gribben brings good intentions to . . . this attempt to impose political

correctness upon the most politically incorrect of American authors,” Pitts says Gribben’s “fix is profoundly wrong” because while “[a]ny work of art represents a series of choices on the part of the artist. . . . The audience is free to accept or reject the choices, it is emphatically NOT free to substitute its own.” For Pitts, also, “. . . it is never a good idea to sugarcoat the past.” He claims that “Twain’s use of the word was an accurate reflection of that era.” But rather than editing out the offensive word, it would be better to “offer students context and challenge them to ask hard questions: WHY did Twain choose that word? What kind of country must this have been that it was so ubiquitous?” Finally, Pitts complains, “it is troubling to think the state of reading comprehension in this country has become this wretched . . . that not only can our children not divine the nuances of a masterpiece, but that we will now protect them from having even to try.”

I missed hearing Scott Simon’s report on NPR’s Weekend Edition that Sunday, but found it online the next day. He reports that Twain biographer Ron Powers decries “the effrontery--the vapid, smiley-faced effrontery,” that enables Gribben “to replace a word that a genius pointedly used more than 200 times when he wrote the book in 1885 seems a bit like covering the large gaping wounds shown in Picasso’s ‘Guernica’ with band-Aids.” Simon acknowledges though, that Gribben “says he doesn’t want one word to keep students from reading a great book.”⁴

Later that week, I found Phillip Rawl’s editorial on the St Louis Post-Dispatch’s website. Rawls reports that Gribben “said the word puts the books in danger of joining the list of literary classics that Twain once humorously defined as those ‘which people praise and don’t read’” and notes that only 7500 copies are to be printed (for use in schools and for school libraries). Rawls also quotes an 1888 letter in which Twain wrote my favorite Twain-ism: “the difference between the almost right word and the right word is the difference between the lightening bug and the lightening.” Rawls mentions that Stephen Railton of the U of Virginia thinks the Gribben edition is a “terrible idea” and that he (Railton) has an “unaltered version coming out later this year, including context for schools to explore racism and slavery in the book.” According to Rawls, Railton says “If we can’t do that in the classroom, we can’t do it anywhere.”

Charles Suhor, in an editorial posted on montgomeryadvertiser.com in late January, expands on the points made by Simon, Rawls, and Pitts about Gribben’s substitution, and makes an interesting and unique point. For decades, Suhor worked with the NCTE to defend teachers and books from censorship. Acknowledging that objections to the word are earnest, he complains “[b]ut clearly, if every sincere objection to a good literary work were to result in banning it, there would be few books left in classrooms or on school library shelves.” The problems with bowdlerization, he writes, is that it’s a violation of the author’s intent and of the integrity of the work, and, most importantly, it “gives heart to the expanded efforts of would-be censors.” He is most alarmed that it “by-passes established orderly pathways for dealing with challenges” which the NCTE and American Library Association have worked on for decades with school districts.

And yet . . .

It’s not that easy, as Lorrie Moore, the mother of a young black male, pointed out in an editorial I found on the New York Times website in mid-January. She says both sides, those who hope this substitution will make teenagers more comfortable, and those who are outraged at censorship, are wrong. She says the substitution of ‘slave’ for ‘nigger’ has a different meaning and “just mucks up the prose.” She suggests that we wait to teach this book until college or graduate school, “where it can be put into proper context.” She writes “The derogatory word is

⁴ Someone who attended the conference and heard this paper presented commented to me that his students would probably be more likely to read a book if it had “inappropriate words” in it. This is a disturbing catch-22.

part of the problem, but not the entirety of it.” She asserts that no novel with any other expletive “spelled out 200 times could or should be separated—for the purposes of irony or pedagogy—from the attitudes that produced those words.” Huck, she concludes, is “not for the inexperienced contemporary reader.” It is not a “welcoming book” that will encourage young black American males to read.

And yet . . .

Michael Moore (professor of literacy education at Georgia Southern University, and, I assume, not the filmmaker or a relative of Lorrie Moore) wrote a column for savannahnow.com., claiming that “Twain in *Huckleberry Finn* provides us with the home run of teachable moments.” Moore points out that all literature arises in a context, and adds that this context “becomes a transaction between the reader and the novel.” Moore argues that *Adventure of Huckleberry Finn* “begs classroom discussion.”

Not having taught *Huckleberry Finn* since 1979, and last having researched its history of censorship in 2002, I decided after confronting this rush of news about the Gribben edition, to do some scholarly research. I found the same controversies seem to have been hashed and rehashed for years in academic discourse, with very few truly new insights. I must say, however, that I am shocked, with Peaches Henry, at the “mocking tone and reductive language,” the “disdainful condescending attitude,” of many literary critics, and their “erroneous supposition that ‘nigger’ can be objectified so as to allow a black person to, as Leslie Fielder claimed, ‘laugh therapeutically’ at slavery (29).⁵ Kaplan also has a markedly dismissive attitude, insisting that anyone who had read the novel and “allowed himself or herself even the barest minimum of intelligent response to its underlying spirit and intention,” could certainly not “accuse it of being racist” just because “some of its characters’ use of offensive racial epithets,” which, anyway, were merely true to the novel’s setting. (18). He says “[o]ne has to be deliberately dense” to misread “this great book” (19).

This inability to recognize and appropriately address the fact that there is a group of readers of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* “that finds the book hard to take” seems to me pervasive in literary criticism of the novel well into the 1990s. However, as Cox claims, “since they do, our complacency is, or should be, shattered” (387). Literary criticism is important, and helpful in contributing to the ongoing scholarly conversation about works of literature. But traditional literary scholarship methods seem unable to address the issue of how *Huckleberry Finn* works in American culture, in classrooms, and in individual readers. We teachers (because teachers are in the peculiar position of being both in academia and in public), must confront the problem of *Huckleberry Finn* as well as the work of art called *Huckleberry Finn*. But how will we do this?

I would like to get you to think through the problem of whether or not we teach this novel. Let me try to do that by taking a completely different tack: that of a rhetorician, rather than a literary scholar. Literary scholars are concerned with the work itself, but their analyses seem not to be productive in solving the problem of “sivilising” *Huckleberry Finn*. Rhetoricians are more concerned with the novel’s rhetorical power: the historical context of the writing, the reception of the novel by its readers in various times and places, and the scholarly conversations surrounding the novel, and how these different facets of the whole affect readers. This tactic may be more helpful.

⁵ Leslie Fiedler, “*Huckleberry Finn*: The Book We Love to Hate,” *Proteus* 1.2 (Fall 1984):6.

Toni Morrison enacts this rhetorical approach in an introduction to an edition of *Huckleberry Finn* in 1992. She writes that when she read *Huckleberry Finn* for the first time, when she was a child, she was both enthralled and alarmed. When she read it again as an adult, “curling through the pleasure, clouding the narrative reward, was my original alarm, coupled now with a profoundly distasteful complicity.” The term itself wasn’t the cause of her alarm, her “sense that danger lingered after the story ended.” She reflects that it is “significant that this novel which had given so much pleasure to young readers was also complicated territory for sophisticated scholars” because usually literature that appeals to children and adolescents doesn’t ‘work’ for adult readers or re-readers. *Huckleberry Finn* does both at once. “In addition to the reverence the novel stimulates is its ability to transform its contradictions into fruitful complexities and to seem to be deliberately cooperating in the controversy it has excited. . . . The brilliance of *Huckleberry Finn* is that it IS the argument it raises (386).

The way Morrison is dealing with *Huckleberry Finn* is very similar to what, in his 1989 *Rhetorical Power*, Steven Mailloux calls “rhetorical hermaneutics” although she doesn’t mention him or assign a label to her own methodology.⁶ Rhetorical hermaneutics examines the cultural history of a text and the academic discourse of interpretation of the text. More than simply philology, reader-response criticism or New Criticism, rhetorical hermaneutics focuses on the effects of a text on readers, and this focus makes it a useful way for us to deal with *Huckleberry Finn*.

Mailloux says *Huckleberry Finn* is both a “participant in the cultural conversation . . . [and a] topic within it; the text talking becomes the text talked about” (87). *Huckleberry Finn*, he says, is an “ideological performance” of a “series of staged debates and speeches. In these dramatized arguments, readers both witness rhetorical power in the narrative and experience its effects in the act of reading”

(60). Readers are both spectators and actors. “In my rhetorical interpretation,” writes Mailloux, “the final clash between entertaining humor and ideological seriousness remains, with all its problematic obtrusiveness. But now the two attitudes are no longer simply positions argued for in the critical history; they are concerns developed in the reader’s experience of the conclusion. [. . .] Either during or after reading the farce, they [readers] must realize that something is wrong, that there IS a problem with the ending, one that the text will not help solve. Reading the text has created the problem insofar as readers have been persuaded to take the earlier humorous critiques of racism seriously. As a result, they must decide whether the ending shows Twain’s ideological retreat or his political realism, whether it contradicts his earlier attack on racism or deliberately represents the impossibility of the ex-slaves freedom. . . . The fact that the problem appears at all testifies that the novel works, not as a formal unity but as a rhetorical performance in which the reader must participate in order to read at all. (98)

And so . . .

What do we do about teaching *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*? Not surprisingly, teacher/scholars have struggled with this question and there is a rich vein of publication of their conclusions. Their thoughtful analyses usually don’t use the same technical language as

⁶See Cox, Fisher, and Oehlschlaeger for other examples of rhetorical analyses of performance, reader complicity, and the ending of *Huckleberry Finn*.

Mailloux, but many seem to build their teaching practices on his theory of rhetorical hermaneutics.

Gerald Graff, Allen Carey-Webb reminds us, urges English teachers to “teach the conflicts” (in *Beyond Culture Wars*). Carey-Webb notes that many English teachers feel threatened by attempts by people who object to *Huckleberry Finn* to remove it from classrooms. Teachers interpret these demands as attempts by non-professionals to control or censor curricula and classroom activities, which not only undermines teacher authority, but also interferes with one of the fundamental goals of education: “the creation of an informed citizenry able to make critical judgments among competing ideas” (23). Carey-Webb tells his own story about the difficulties of teaching *Huckleberry Finn* to undergraduate and graduate students, and concludes that we need to pay attention to students’ reactions and listen to their views. “It is crystal clear to me,” he concludes, “that *Huckleberry Finn* should not be taught in a curriculum that simply showcases literary works without developing student skills at challenging the classics and thinking critically about literature, history, politics, and language” (28).

However, in the same volume of *English Journal* as Carey-Webb’s article, Marylee Hengstebeck writes that she has decided not to teach the novel. Her main concern is that it’s “a bit of a copout” to use *Huckleberry Finn* mainly as a framework on which to base lessons on racism. Racism, she complains, “becomes a justification for teaching the novel” (32). She also feels that it’s unfair to embarrass black students so that white students can learn about racism. She is not happy about her decision, and she explains the reasons for her feelings in terms that recognize the rhetorical power of the novel, its history, and the ongoing dialogue of interpretations:

. . . [T]here’s more at stake here than a novel. There’s a basic idea on the line about America and its self-concept. That’s why the arguments on both sides are so heated. And I think that’s part of why it’s so hard for me not to want to teach *Huckleberry Finn*. The old story that I was told – of a free, great, and liberated America – is a comforting and hopeful one that’s hard to let go of. I think that in trying to hold onto *Huckleberry Finn* we’re all making one last grasp for that old national identification that’s on its way out. (32)

Ann Lew, writing in the same volume of *English Journal*, explains how in her 11th grade American Literature class, she presents the novel in its historical context, lays the groundwork, discusses the controversies, tells students about her own “evolution” in relationship to the book, talks to them about her own extensive research, and how she “came to the conclusion that this novel is indeed worthy of being THE required Am lit text” (18). Kathleen Schulten reports on a similar approach to teaching *Huckleberry Finn* that grew out of a collaborative effort between parents, the school board, public school teachers, and professors at Villanova. “*Huckleberry Finn* had been put in a new context,” in the process of this collaboration and in the six-week lesson plan that they developed, she writes, “one that explores the controversy – and with it issues of race, stereotyping, power, heroism, and self-definition – by embedding the traditional ways of teaching the novel in a rich historical and cultural framework” (56).

So I end with the same question with which I began: “can’t you behave, Huckleberry?” And a new question: can we teach *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* in the diverse classrooms of our multi-cultural communities, within an often highly-charged public discourse?

And my answer to both questions is No.

And yet . . .

We teach students, not books. Mailloux's rhetorical hermeneutics gives us a way to move the text out of, and the readers in to, the teachers' center of attention. Rather than teaching *Huckleberry Finn*, we should be teaching our students to read *Huckleberry Finn* rhetorically, teaching them the skills they need to adequately deal with "troublesome" texts themselves. Some good teachers seem to instinctively know how to do this, of course, but in order to explain our decisions and practices to others (students and colleagues who question us, administrators who worry about us, individuals and public groups who challenge us, state officials who control our funding, members of the press who seek a quick sound bite) we need to be conscious of our decision-making processes, and able to articulate our reasons. Most of all, we need to be able to teach our students how to do this. In other words, teachers need to be rhetoricians.

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