Racism and *Huckleberry Finn*: Censorship, Dialogue, and Change

Allen Carey-Webb

A masterpiece.

T. S. Eliot

One of the world’s great books and one of the central documents of American culture.

Lionel Trilling

All modern American literature comes from one book by Mark Twain called *Huckleberry Finn*. . . . There was nothing before. There has been nothing as good since.

Ernest Hemingway

For the past forty years, black families have trekked to schools in numerous districts throughout the country to say, “This book is not good for our children,” only to be turned away by insensitive and often unwittingly racist teachers and administrators who respond, “This book is a classic.”

John H. Wallace

*Huckleberry Finn* may be the most exalted single work of American literature. Praised by our best known critics and writers, the novel is enshrined at the center of the American-literature curriculum. According to Arthur Applebee (1992, 28) the work is second only to Shakespeare in the frequency with which it appears in the classroom, required in seventy percent of public high schools and seventy-six percent of parochial high schools. The most taught novel, the most taught long work, and the most taught piece of American literature, *Huckleberry Finn* is a staple from junior high (where eleven chapters are included in the Junior Great Books program) to graduate school. Written in a now vanished dialect, told from the point of view of a runaway fourteen-year-old, the novel combines melodramatic boyhood adventure, farcical low comedy, and pointed social satire. Yet at its center is a relationship between a white boy and an escaped slave, an association freighted with the trag-
edy and the possibility of American history. Despite a social order set against interracial communication and respect, Huck develops a comradeship with Jim for which he is willing—against all he has been taught—to risk his soul.

Huck Finn: Censorship and Sensitivity

Despite the novel's sanctified place and overtly anti-racist message, since school desegregation in the 1950s, African Americans have raised objections to Huckleberry Finn and its effect on their children. Linking their complaints with the efforts of other groups to influence the curriculum, we English teachers have seen the issue as one of censorship, defending the novel and our right to teach it. In so doing we have been properly concerned: the freedom of professional classroom teachers to design and implement curriculum must be protected as censorship undermines the creation of an informed citizenry able to make critical judgments among competing ideas. Yet, considering the objections to Huckleberry Finn only in terms of freedom and censorship doesn't resolve a potentially divisive situation. For this we need to listen to objections raised to the novel, reconsider the process of teaching it, and, most broadly, reflect on the role of school literature in depicting, interrogating, and affirming our national culture and history. I believe that responsible teaching requires us to enter into a dialogue with those who have objections to the novel. Doing so, I am convinced, leads to important learning for ourselves and, above all, for our students.

A “communication shut-down” is the way I would describe what happened in November 1991 in a largely white suburb just next door to the university in which I train English teachers. Black student and parent concerns during the teaching of Huckleberry Finn led to a decision to immediately remove the text from the classroom in the district’s two high schools. Required to read a brief statement to their students stating that the book had been withdrawn, teachers were prohibited from further discussion of Huckleberry Finn or of reasons for its removal until “more sensitive” approaches were found. Local television and newspaper reporters learned of the story, and English teachers, students, parents, and administrators suddenly and unexpectedly found themselves at the center of a difficult and very public controversy. An impassioned meeting at the high school made the nightly news. A subsequent meeting with the school board was broadcast on the cable-access channel. Expressing sentiments that might be echoed by many across the country, these teachers felt that they had all along been teaching appropriately. One teacher told the local paper, “We have shown a concerted effort to express what we call sensitivity,” and “we feel a very strong kinship to this book because of what we believe it stands for.” Upset that their freedom in the classroom was impinged upon, these teachers were also confused and pained that parents should find the text and their methods insensitive. On the other side, black students who raised concerns with teachers about the book felt they had not been listened to, and black parents concluded that a tight-knit group of narrow-minded teachers had shut out and demeaned their legitimate concerns. Some white students were angry that the complaints of the black students meant they couldn’t finish reading the book. Some black students felt that long friendships with white students were in jeopardy. In sum, parents were angry with teachers, teachers felt threatened and misunderstood, administrators went in various directions but failed to follow policies already in place, and students were alienated from the school and from one another. As of this writing more than a year has passed, yet little has changed. The novel has been reinstated, but teachers remain understandably nervous about using it, unclear as to why blacks object to it, and uncertain just how it should best be taught. As with similar incidents that have occurred again and again around the country, this controversy over Huckleberry Finn only exacerbated problems of interracial communication and respect.

We can and must do better. Doing better begins with a careful look at the complex racial issues raised by the novel and an active listening to the views of African Americans, teachers, scholars, writers, parents, and students. That Huckleberry Finn draws the attention of black families should not be a surprise. Since no text by a black—or any other minority group member for that matter—has yet to make it to the list of most frequently taught works, Huckleberry Finn has a peculiar visibility. The novel remains the only one in the common “canon” to treat slavery, to represent a black dialect, and to have a significant role for an African American character. The length of the novel, the demands it places on instructional time, and its centrality in the curriculum augment its prominence. Add to this the presence in the novel of the most powerful
racial epithet in English—the word appears 213 times—and it is evident why *Huckleberry Finn* legitimately concerns African American parents sending their children into racially mixed classrooms.

**Huck Finn: Satire or Evasion?**

*Huckleberry Finn* has also consistently attracted the attention of prominent black scholars and writers who, since the 1950s, have thought carefully about the work and its role in the curriculum. As of 1992 we are fortunate to have much of their analysis readily available in a paperback volume entitled *Satire or Evasion? Black Perspectives on Huckleberry Finn* (Leonard, Tenney, and Davis 1992). This is a book all teachers of *Huckleberry Finn* ought to read. Every contributor is concerned with the role of the book in the classroom; most are professors at leading universities, some have high-school teaching experience. The diverse and divergent essays in *Satire or Evasion* demonstrate the complexity of Twain’s novel and the racial issues it raises. In addition to the articles, *Satire or Evasion* contains a complete annotated bibliography on issues of race, the novel, and the classroom.

The collection begins with an essay by John H. Wallace, the black school administrator at Mark Twain Intermediate School in Fairfax, Virginia, who played a prominent role in the debates over the novel in the early 1980s (1992). Wallace’s essay is followed by others that take significantly different and more subtle positions, but most contributors agree on several key points. First, they make a persuasive case that Twain’s depiction of Jim owes much to the popular nineteenth-century black-face minstrel show where white actors darkened their skin to the color of coal to render comic burlesques of African American speech and manners. This insight is not entirely new: nearly fifty years ago Ralph Ellison wrote that “Twain fitted Jim into the outlines of the minstrel tradition, and it is from behind this stereotype mask that we see Jim’s dignity and human capacity—and Twain’s complexity—emerge” (1964, 65). While Ellison noted Twain’s talent, he remarked on a fundamental ambivalence in Jim’s portrayal that justified the discomfort of the Negro reader. He found Jim “a white man’s inadequate portrait of a slave” (72). (Ellison’s essay “Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke,” frequently referred to in *Satire or Evasion*, is found in its entirety in *Shadow and Act*, 61–73).

*Satire or Evasion* considerably elaborates Ellison’s remarks. The contributors offer significant evidence that Twain himself was an avid fan of the black-face minstrelsy. Bernard Bell, a professor of English at the University of Massachusetts, quotes from one of Twain’s letters: “The minstrel used a very broad Negro dialect; he used it competently and with easy facility and it was funny—delightfully and satisfyingly funny” (1992, 128). When the shows appeared to be dying out in the early twentieth century, Bell points out, Twain lamented the loss of “the real nigger show—the genuine nigger show, the extravagant nigger show—the show which to me has no peer and whose peer has not arrived” (127). As his affection for the minstrel show indicates, the contributors point out, Twain’s personal attitudes toward blacks were contradictory. His father and uncle owned slaves, yet his wife was the daughter of a prominent abolitionist. He fought briefly with the confederate army, yet later in life paid a black student’s way through Yale Law School. Though he protested against lynching and discrimination, he loved minstrel shows and “nigger jokes.” In their essay Frederick Woodard and Donnarae MacCann, a professor and a graduate student at the University of Iowa, argue that Twain’s affection for the minstrel show is fundamental to the portrayal of Jim:

The swaggering buffoonery of the minstrel clown is represented early in the novel when Jim awakes and finds his hat in a tree (one of Tom’s tricks), and then concocts a tale about witches and the devil. (145).

They argue that

The “stage Negro’s” typical banter about wife troubles, profit making, spooks, and formal education is echoed in episodes in *Huckleberry Finn*, and their inclusion can be traced to a period when Twain was in the midst of planning a new tour of stage readings.
Jim gives his impression of "King Sollermun" and his harem in a minstrel-like repartee (chap. 14) and his confusion about stock market profits is seen in a farcical account of how Jim's stock—his cow—failed to increase his fourteen dollar fortune when he "tuck to specalat'n'" (chap. 8). Throughout the novel Jim is stupefied by information that Huck shares with him, as when they discuss Louis XVI's "little boy the dolphin." (145)

"White people may want to believe such fairy tales about themselves, but blacks know better." —Julius Lester

Several scholars in Satire or Evasion point out that in the sequels that Twain wrote to Huckleberry Finn (Tom Sawyer Abroad and the unfinished Tom Sawyer's Conspiracy) Jim also appears as "the patient simpleton" and "Huck and Tom amuse themselves while risking Jim's dignity and even his life" (152). In this view, even the affection Huck and the reader feel for Jim fits with the minstrel tradition where the comic black characters are congenial and nonthreatening.

While a couple of the contributors to Satire or Evasion develop complex explanations of how the end of the novel serves as "Twain's satire on the extremes to which the defeated Confederacy went to keep the black population enslaved" (213), for the most part these African American scholars and teachers are profoundly disappointed with Huck Finn's final chapters. Although Jim runs away early on in the book, his independence is downplayed because he never makes his own way to freedom; it is Miss Watson's benevolence rather than Jim's intelligence or courage that gains him his liberty. Further, the believability of the deus ex machina freeing of Jim depends on an unsustainably innocent view of racial relations. Speaking of the public knowledge that Jim is suspected of killing Huck, writer and English professor Julius Lester comments,

Yet we are now to believe that an old white lady would free a black slave suspected of murdering a white child. White people may want to believe such fairy tales about themselves, but blacks know better. (1992, 203)

In examining the conclusion of the novel, these scholars are troubled by the way the developing relationship between Jim and Huck abruptly seems to lose its meaning as Huck accedes to Tom Sawyer's cruel and senseless manipulations. Rhett Jones, an English professor at Rutgers, writes,

The high adventures of the middle chapters, Huck's admiration of Jim, Jim's own strong self-confidence, and the slave's willingness to protect and guide Huck are all, in some sense, rendered meaningless by the closing chapters, in which Twain turns Jim over to two white boys on a lark. (1992, 186)

Jones views Huck's failure to speak up, his only protest being to compare stealing "a nigger" to "a watermelon, or a Sunday school book," as Huck finally rejecting Jim's humanity. He points out that Huck in the closing paragraph is careful to tell the reader all about Tom and himself, including Aunt Sally's plans to adopt him. But the reader who is interested in learning what Jim intends to do, how he intends to rejoin his family, and what plans he has for freeing them is left in the dark when Huck flatly concludes, "There ain't nothing more to write about." Huck is not interested in the fate of Jim—much less that of his family—nor is Tom; nor, evidently, was Twain. (190)

Bernard Bell puts it simply: "Twain—nostalgically and metaphorically—sells Jim down river for laughs at the end" (138).

Seen from the point of view of some of these scholars, even the most cherished aspects of the book begin to appear ambiguous, compromised. Focusing on the portrayal of Jim in the latter part of the book, particularly the testimony of the doctor who recaptures Jim after Jim has risked freedom to stand by the injured Tom, Lester comments,

It is a picture of the only kind of black that whites have ever truly liked—faithful, tending sick whites, not speaking, not causing trouble, and totally passive. He is the archetypal "good nigger," who lacks self-respect, dignity, and a sense of self separate from the one whites want him to have. A century of white readers have accepted this characterization because it permits their own "humanity" to shine through with more luster. (203)
Some of the scholars are even critical of Huck’s reasoning when he decides to “go to hell” for Jim. Jones points out that when Huck considers “Jim’s love for him, Jim’s humanity, and, most important, the ways in which Jim has served Huck,” he “concludes that Jim has done a great deal for him but in none of his reflections does he consider Jim’s own needs, much less those of his wife and children” (188).

Shelley Fisher Fishkin puts forward a well-publicized argument in *Was Huck Black?: Mark Twain and African-American Voices* (1993) that Twain patterned Huck’s speech on that of black children, thus suggesting a close interrelationship between racial identities in the novel. Her position is anticipated in *Satire or Evasion* by Arnold Rampersad (1992), Professor of English at Princeton, who makes the case that *Huck Finn*, with its stress on folk culture, on dialect, and on American humor, can be seen to be “near the fountainhead” for African American writers such as Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Ralph Ellison, and Alice Walker. Rampersad explores issues of alienation in the novel, comparing Twain to Richard Wright, James Baldwin, and Toni Morrison, yet he argues that the major compromise of the novel is not the ending, but that Jim never gains the intellectual complexity of Huck, never becomes a figure of disruptive alienation, nor even seems capable of learning this from Huck. “Assuredly Twain knew that Huck’s attitude could be contagious, and that blacks had more reason than whites to be alienated and angry” (226), Rampersad writes. Consequently, despite the close relationship that Huck and Jim develop on the raft—and the possibility that Huck’s own language may owe something to black dialect—their roles and human possibilities are kept resolutely separate and unequal.

In her recent study of American fiction (1992, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*), Toni Morrison—winner of the Pulitzer Prize for *Beloved*, her own novel about slavery—goes further in criticizing *Huckleberry Finn* than the contributors to *Satire or Evasion*. Morrison believes that in the novel there is a close “interdependence of slavery and freedom, of Huck’s growth and Jim’s serviceability within it, and even of Mark Twain’s inability to continue, to explore the journey into free territory” (55). She is struck by two things in the novel:

the apparently limitless store of love and compassion the black man has for his white friend and white masters; and his assumption that the whites are indeed what they say they are, superior and adult. (56)

According to Morrison,

Jim permits his persecutors to torment him, humiliate him, and responds to the torment and humiliation with boundless love. The humiliation comes *after* we have experienced Jim as an adult, a caring father and a sensitive man. If Jim had been a white ex-convict befriended by Huck, the ending could not have been imagined or written. (56)

What is above all disturbing about the novel, Morrison argues, is not its portrayal of Jim, “but what Mark Twain, Huck, and especially Tom need from him” (57). Rather than merely a white man’s limited portrait of a slave, the novel demonstrates the inadequacy of Euro-American utopian aspirations; Morrison says *Huck Finn* “simulates and describes the parasitical nature of white freedom” (57). In her reading, then, the American dream of freedom may well be embodied in Huck and Jim’s time on the river, but if so then that very dream itself is fundamentally flawed, resting on a shedding of social responsibility and a failure to examine relations of subservience.

**Huck Finn: Text and Film**

The racial problematics of *Huckleberry Finn* are partly “corrected” in the recently released Hollywood version (1993). The film shuns the complexities of irony and satire that make understanding the novel difficult. All points of view are simply and directly argued; offending passages are cut away. All 213 repetitions of the racial epithet are simply eliminated. The Widow Douglas espouses an explicitly abolitionist position. Above all, Jim is a far stronger character. His superstitiousness becomes a self-conscious put-on, and rather than being frightened of Huck and thinking him a ghost when they meet on Jackson Island, it is Jim who surprises and frightens Huck. Running away with a plan and a map, Jim exercises planning and foresight. Still ridiculed by being dressed up as an “African” by the Duke and King, Jim is for the most part more articulate: he directly argues for the elimination of slavery. Also enhancing the depiction of Jim is the

---

**Jim and Huck’s roles and human possibilities are kept resolutely separate and unequal.**
film’s elimination of Tom Sawyer. Without Tom, the scene in the second chapter where Jim is mocked by stealing his hat disappears. The problematic final eleven chapters of the novel—where Jim is a helpless and gullible figure for Tom’s scheming—are simply done away with. By making Huck (instead of Tom, as in the novel) the injured boy that Jim must save, the climax of the film becomes a reciprocating act of friendship, rather than a deus ex machina revelation that Jim has all along been free. Although far from examining slavery from an African American perspective or telling its full horror, the film does add scenes of a plantation with a cruel overseer whipping slaves, Jim among them. Huck views this brutality, consciously examines his own complicity in the system of racial inequality, explicitly and determinately rejects slavery as an institution, and personally apologizes to Jim for his own complicity in slavery. None of this is in Twain’s novel. Rather than serving as a contemporary testament to Twain’s greatness, the radically revised film simply points to significant problems in the original text. After watching the film with my school-age son, I had a troubling and, for an English teacher, iconoclastic thought: might this Hollywood production be more effective with students than the novel itself?

One student considered himself so isolated as the only black person in the classroom that he was unable to share his reaction even privately with his teacher.

Huck Finn: Culture and Classrooms

My own experience with students in the classroom would seem to verify that one’s cultural background influences reactions to the novel. This last year (1992–93) I taught Huck Finn in two classes with racially different student populations, with clearly different results. The first class, in the fall, a college-level course, Black American Literature, focused on the theme of slavery and included a wide range of primary and secondary material from the seventeenth century to the present. We studied depictions of slavery by black authors such as Olaudah Equiano, Frederick Douglass, Linda Brent, Nat Turner, Langston Hughes, Ishmael Reed, and Toni Morrison as well as white authors Aphra Behn, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Caroline Lee Hentz, Herman Melville, and Mark Twain. We viewed segments of Roots. Half of the students enrolled in the course were African American and half were white, all from Detroit and medium-size towns throughout Michigan. Given the historical and thematic integration of the course, each new text we read was examined in light of what we already knew, and, simultaneously, the new texts led us to fundamentally rethink our previous reading. For example, it wasn’t until after reading Douglass, Brent, and Turner that my students, both white and black, were able to fully recognize the stereotyping of Uncle Tom’s Cabin. Stowe’s black characters only appeared as stock figures in a white abolitionist imagination after we came to know the intellectually questing Douglass, the trapped and emotionally conflicted Brent, and the violent and unrepentant Turner. Focusing on a historical theme and putting the texts next to each other encouraged students to make sophisticated judgments, write complex papers, and engage in increasingly meaningful discussions.

After reading and discussing Huck Finn in the context of this class, my African American college students from first-year students to seniors—many of them planning to become teachers themselves—were concerned about the use of Huck Finn in the high school, an institution they themselves had only recently left. Some of these students talked about their own experiences as the only or nearly the only African American student in an otherwise white classroom. In this situation they resented being turned to as experts by their white teachers, and they were uncomfortable being stared at by their fellow students. One of the brightest and most outspoken students—a popular college junior and an actor who had done stage appearances as Malcolm X—spoke of how as a high-school sophomore he had read Huck Finn, felt demeaned and angry in the process, and yet considered himself so isolated by his situation as the only black person in the classroom that he was unable to share his reaction even privately with his teacher. What does it tell us about the challenge we teachers face in attempting to teach the novel that such a student, in this case the son of two college professors, lacked confidence to raise the issue?

Just as I would if I were teaching a typical novel in high school, I read several passages of the book aloud to the class to set up a discussion. One of the
passages was the paragraph where Tom and Huck trick Jim in the second chapter. In this paragraph the epithet occurs seven times. Although I read the passage gently and as "sensitively" as I could, it was clear that hearing the word come out of my mouth made my African American college students bristle. One African American student (who was in fact of a mixed racial background and thus particularly acute on the question) was quite direct with me in the discussion afterwards. He pointed out that while this word may be used by blacks with other blacks, it simply must not be used by whites. In his opinion, while a black teacher might be able to read Huckleberry Finn aloud, a white teacher, no matter how "sympathetic," simply could not without offending black students.

Still trying to understand the issue of Huckleberry Finn in the classroom, I taught the novel again during the second semester, this time in a methods class for fifth-year English majors who themselves would soon be student teachers in high-school and middle-school language-arts classrooms. In addition to reading Huckleberry Finn we read Douglass, Turner, Brent, and several of the essays from Satire or Evasion. In contrast with the African American literature class, nearly all the students in this methods class are of Euro-American background (as are ninety-eight percent of all the education students at our university). In this class there was one African American student. She told me after the course was over that the only day she really felt completely comfortable in the room was the day we had a black professor and eight black students from my course in the fall come to join us for a discussion of the novel. Simply having more people of color in the class and listening to their point of view had a powerful impact on all the students. Up until that day, they were confident that they would be able to teach Huckleberry Finn in appropriate and sensitive ways; after that, although nearly all of them decided that they would teach the novel, their final projects indicated it would not be an easy task.

Teaching Huck Finn: Principles and Caveats

Those who still want to teach Huckleberry Finn after reading this article and exploring the perspectives offered by Satire or Evasion can marshal impressive arguments for their cause, not the least of which is the importance of having students examine the issue for themselves. We are sometimes so busy trying to "cover all the material" or "expose" our students to "great literature" that we fail to take the time to focus in, develop connections between works and contexts, and explore the relevance of what we read to the present. It is crystal clear to me 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. If the novel is going to be taught, the following principles are indispensable:

1. The teaching of Huckleberry Finn should be sensitive to the racial dynamics of the classroom.
2. The presence of the racial epithet in the text must be openly addressed, and a strategy for use of the term should be developed.
3. Along with reading the book, objections to Twain’s portrayal of African Americans should be examined, and texts about slavery written by black authors should be included and compared with Twain. (See sidebar.)
4. The parents of high-school students should be informed that the text will be used; intellectually meaningful alternative assignments should be available for students uncomfortable with the novel.

The dynamics of teaching Huckleberry Finn differ considerably from classroom to classroom, based on the race of the teacher and the proportion of minority students in the classroom, as well as on local social, cultural, and political factors. Talking across racial lines about questions of race always carries emotional impact. The issues require a sensitivty and intellectual maturity from students that is not ordinarily found below the eleventh grade. Teachers and students who undertake to read Huck Finn must be committed to respecting and learning from minority views.

---

Teachers and students who undertake to read Huck Finn must be committed to respecting and learning from minority views.
While we might hope that classrooms without black students will become increasingly rare, forty years after Brown vs. Board of Education a de facto racial segregation is still the norm in many of America's suburbs and rural areas and in many private schools. In a classroom without African Americans, teachers often mistakenly believe that they are “off the hook” and need not deal with racial issues. As the country and the world become increasingly interrelated and as the current white majority in this country becomes a minority in the twenty-first century, it will, however, be all the more imperative for white students to learn a multicultural literature and history. A classroom without African Americans presents particular difficulties for the teacher and students reading *Huckleberry Finn*. Lacking black voices in the room, it will be difficult for “sympathy” or “understanding” to be more than superficial. Issues of race may be treated at a safe though somewhat uncomfortable intellectual distance: “I think that they would think . . . .” “If I were black I would feel . . . .” In a classroom without blacks, some students may seek to relieve the tension that a discussion of race brings by making supposedly funny, but actually inappropriate, racial remarks. A white teacher in this situation needs to make it clear from the outset that such remarks are not acceptable whether or not blacks are present to hear them. Students and parents in such contexts may resent any time spent on racial questions or on black history and culture as “too much” time, yet for these students more time is necessary to understanding the literature and preparing for democratic citizenship. Inviting black speakers to the class, regardless of their viewpoint, is especially important. It is relatively easy for white teachers to argue for the importance of multicultural perspectives and racial understanding, while teachers of color, black or otherwise, attempting the same pedagogy may be perceived as “hypersensitive” or “activist” or may be accused of “reverse racism.”

When issues of race come up in classes where black students constitute a small minority, these students will sense that they are singled out.

---

**Works about Slavery Appropriate for High-School Students**


This is a classic study of the life and culture of American slave communities. A valuable classroom resource, it is readable and contains numerous illustrations. Students at all levels will find it helpful.


As a teenager Harriet Jacobs (aka Linda Brent) had to withstand the cruelty and sexual advances of her master. As a young woman she hid for years in order to be out of slavery but near her children. Students will find in this story of resistance to slavery a very different perspective from that of *Huck Finn*. Brent is a sophisticated thinker and fine writer.


An early African American novel that explores the life of Thomas Jefferson’s illegitimate slave daughter. High-school students will find it fascinating.


This fine turn-of-the-century novel by a somewhat lesser known but excellent black novelist is perfect for high-school students. Set in the period just after the end of slavery, the novel uses a detective-fiction style to explore the experience of blacks in the South after the Civil War.


Douglass wrote three autobiographies; this is the first, shortest, and most famous. A master of language, Douglass contrasts the cruelty of slavery with the desire of slaves for knowledge and freedom. No Jim, Douglass learns to read, explicitly adopts and develops abolitionist arguments, teaches other slaves, fights back—at one point punching his master—and plans a careful escape.


The collection by Gates is not only inexpensive, but includes other important slave narratives, such as

---

Continued on p. 30
singled out, that the other students are looking at them, waiting for a reaction. In a letter to the New York Times, Allan Ballard describes his experience in a predominantly white junior-high school in Philadelphia in the 1950s:

I can still recall the anger I felt as my white classmates read aloud the word “nigger.” In fact, as I write this letter I am getting angry all over again. I wanted to sink into my seat. Some of the whites snickered, others giggled. I can recall nothing of the literary merits of this work that you term “the greatest of all American novels.” I only recall the sense of relief I felt when I would flip ahead a few pages and see that the word “nigger” would not be read that hour. (qtd. in Henry 1992, 29)

Nonblack teachers need to understand that it may be difficult for black students, even the most able, to express their reservations or concerns about matters of race to their teacher. Silent refusal to read the novel, distracting comments or behavior, an excess of humor in the classroom by students asked to read Huckleberry Finn should be seen by teachers not as student insubordination or narrow-mindedness but as inchoate expressions of resistance to a possibly inappropriate curriculum or pedagogy. Since a special burden falls on them, African American students have a right to expect that they will be consulted in advance of reading “and discussing the novel. Particularly if the teacher is white, it is important that minority students know that the teacher is aware of their position. Minority students can be told that when they write or participate in discussion that they can choose to either speak “just as a person” or, if they choose to, identify their viewpoint with that of other African Americans.

In a classroom where half or more of the students are black, African American students are less likely to feel isolated. Yet in these classrooms teachers still need to find ways to affirm student voices and facilitate communication between racial groups. Small-group discussion plays a particularly important role in this classroom. Such groups will probably be more racially mixed if students are assigned by “counting off,” though group self-selection may be important in helping to build comfort level and confidence. Unless their purposes are made explicit, teachers should avoid overtly separating groups by race. As a white teacher with about half African American students, I observe an evolution in class discussion. In the first weeks the

Continued from p. 29

“The Life of Olaudah Equiano” and the story of Mary Prince. In addition, it includes excerpts from the writings of Frederick Douglass and Linda Brent which are listed in this sidebar.


A massive study of slave culture written by a leading African American historian, this work is surprisingly approachable though encyclopedic. Genovese’s wife, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, has also done important work on slave culture, particularly the experience of women. Advanced students might want to examine Within the Plantation Household (1988, Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 544pp., $13.95. ISBN 0-807-84232-X).


Hughes’ play offers a compelling look at personal and social relations in the “big house” among slave masters, their slave mistresses, and mulatto children. There is a certain mystery about the period in which the action takes place that gives the play a transhistorical dimension.


Though all of us may have seen the television movie and read the book, many of our students have not encountered it. The six-part video series is a fine way to complement other reading about slavery and presents one of the few depictions I know of slave capture and transportation to America.


A short story by the renowned Senegalese author, this work examines the effect on African culture of the slave trade.


Not to be confused with the novel of the same name by William Styron, Turner’s original confessions were recorded by a journalist named T. R. Gray and are probably the most riveting fifteen pages you or your students will ever read. Throwing caution to the winds Turner and his group of rebelling slaves would arrive at one plantation after another, slaughter the white families and be joined by many of the slaves

Continued on p. 31
majority of large-group discussion volunteers are often white. As we work with small groups, as I show an interest in listening to minority perspectives, and as I invite non-volunteers to participate, a more balanced class discussion evolves. African American voices are not automatically affirmed just because African American students are present in the classroom. Since African American culture is not the focus of academic attention in most schools—even schools with a majority of African American students—it is not fair for teachers to assume that black students know “their” history or literature. Thus it may be just as important for students in a class with a larger percentage of black students to acquaint themselves with complementary background materials from African American perspectives.

Teaching Huckleberry Finn: Language and Epithets

In addition to carefully considering the racial dynamics of the classroom, in reading Huckleberry Finn it is important to recognize the power of language, in particular racial epithets. Teachers make a mistake when they excuse Twain’s use of the term on the grounds that it was accepted in his time. All of the scholars I have read on the subject agree with professor David L. Smith that, “Even when Twain was writing his book, ‘nigger’ was universally recognized as an insulting, demeaning word” (1992, 107). Peaches Henry, former high-school teacher and graduate student at Columbia University, describes the history and politics of the word:

Unable to utter the taboo word “nigger,” students would be paralyzed, the whites by their social awareness of the moral injunction against it and the blacks

Continued from p. 30

before moving on. Though the rebels, including Turner, were eventually caught and hanged, their revolt reveals that anger and violent resistance were very much a part of slavery.


More approachable for most high-school students than other contemporary black fiction on slavery such as Toni Morrison’s Beloved, Ishmael Reed’s Flight to Canada, or Charles Johnson’s Middle Passage, Jubilee is a powerful and compelling novel of one woman’s journey through slavery and its aftermath.


The first novel by an African American woman, Our Nig is about the oppression of black servants in the North rather than about slavery per se. Alice Walker says of Harriet Wilson, "It is as if we’d just discovered Phillis Wheatley—or Langston Hughes.... She represents a similar vastness of heretofore unexamined experience, a whole layer of time and existence in American life and literature."


In a series of excerptable and highly readable chapters, Zinn offers a version of American history from the people’s point of view. For use with Huckleberry Finn or as part of a unit on slavery, the chapters “Drawing the Color Line,” and “Slavery without Submission, Emancipation without Freedom” would be essential. Zinn’s history offers other chapters that complement many other works we teach and has a useful bibliography.

tions of “that word” generate a cultural discomfort that blacks share with no other racial group. (1992, 31)

Henry believes that in teaching texts such as Huckleberry Finn or To Kill a Mockingbird the word should be “forced” into active class discourse in a controlled classroom setting because in her experience “students (black or white) could only face sensitive issues of race after they had achieved a certain emotional distance from the rhetoric of race” (41). She describes her experience with ninth graders:

Unable to utter the taboo word “nigger,” students would be paralyzed, the whites by their social awareness of the moral injunction against it and the blacks
The decision of whether or not to teach *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is a difficult one for me. I've gone back and forth so often on the issue the only thing I'm sure of is that it's a lose/lose proposition. If I decide to teach it, I must virtually ignore parts of the novel I love and focus on more important aspects—racism and slavery. If I don't teach it, I'm putting myself in the position of walking a fine line between censorship and sensitivity. In the end, I have decided not to teach the novel, but it's been a long and bumpy way there.

I have a paper, neatly typed and filed away, that I wrote a few semesters back that vehemently supports the teaching of *Huck Finn*. At the time, I didn't see the book as racist, a fact that is so obvious now, I can't believe I didn't see it then. I think it's hard for white people to recognize racism, especially when they're surrounded by other white people for most of their lives.

Although they made many good points, the black scholars included in *Satire or Evasion? Black Perspectives on Huckleberry Finn* (James S. Leonard, Thomas Tenney, and Thadious M. Davis, eds., 1992, Durham: Duke UP) really didn't persuade me. I find John Wallace's stance especially offensive and reactionary. His personally rewritten, "sanitized" version of *Huck Finn* is, in my view, a blatant example of censorship. If we're going to strip novels of what they are—the very words they're made of—then we might as well paint clothes on the nudes in the Sistine Chapel! *Huck Finn* is a mixed package, and we must either take it or leave it completely. Selective editing only masks the real problem.

For a long time, I thought that I could still teach this book, making racism the central topic of discussion in class, but I have now decided that this was a flawed idea. If I really want to teach and discuss with my students the issue of racism (which I do), there are much better texts to use than *Huck Finn*. Using it as a primary vehicle for discussing racism is a bit of a copout, considering that it was written by a white man and presents a rather ambiguous morality on the issue of slavery. By studying racism and this novel together, I almost feel that teaching about racism is being subordinated to the teaching of *Huck Finn*. In fact, incorporating discussions about racism becomes a justification for teaching the novel, not the purpose. At least for me.

If *Huck Finn* is used solely as a part of a unit on slavery or racism, we sell the book short. I love *Huck Finn*, always have, and while I accept the fact that it's racist, it's also many other things—breezy, hilarious, complex, and an adventure to read. As a teacher, I can't just present the racism in this book, discuss it with students, and then move on to talk about the "real" story, or the parts that I prefer. That undermines the seriousness of the race/slavery issue and does a disservice to the complexity of the novel. Racism isn't a subject that can be easily compartmentalized, and it would be very difficult to deal with other subjects addressed in the book after the issue of stereotypes is raised.

When one is confronted with the feelings of black students who can speak for themselves, all arguments, academic and otherwise, quickly grind to a halt. How am I supposed to explain to black students that they will be embarrassed/humiliated so that I can educate their fellow white students about racism? The whole idea seems racist at the core; once again, white students and their needs are being put first. And then there's the word, "nigger." As Peaches Henry cautions in *Satire or Evasion* (1992, "The Struggle for Tolerance: Race and Censorship in Huckleberry Finn," Durham: Duke UP, 25-48), I shared in "the incapacity of non-blacks to comprehend the enormous emotional freight attached to the hate word 'nigger' for each black person." I had no idea how ugly the word sounds read aloud or the charged atmosphere that results from it. Listening to black students tell me firsthand how it made them feel is what changed my mind. Now I think that it's not only insensitive but abusive to expect black students to sit quietly and be stared at while the word "nigger" is read aloud in their own classroom in 1993. I simply cannot do it, and won't.

On a larger level, I think that the *Huck Finn* controversy represents a lot more than even these issues. *Huck Finn* is considered by many (probably myself included) to be "the great American novel." And I think that the book is distinctly "American" (whatever that means!) for better, and often, for worse. *Huck Finn* is as much a part of American culture and mythology as the lore of Manifest Destiny and the lone cowboy. And it's just as flawed. Manifest Destiny was a grand and glorious idea that the West was ours (white America)'s for the taking. The Native Americans were only a small footnote to that story. *Huck Finn* is representative of the irreverent, rugged individual who "lights out for the territory" before he can be "civilized." The people who were denied that same freedom are allotted only a small and pleasant part of his story. And so there'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 *Huck 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 on to *Huck Finn* we're all making one last grasp for that old national identity that's on the way out.

*Huck Finn, Slavery, and Me*  
Marylee Hengstbeek  

The decision of whether or not to teach *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is a difficult one for me. I've gone back and forth so often on the issue the only thing I'm sure of is that it's a lose/lose proposition. If I decide to teach it, I must virtually ignore parts of the novel I love and focus on more important aspects—racism and slavery. If I don't teach it, I'm putting myself in the position of walking a fine line between censorship and sensitivity. In the end, I have decided not to teach the novel, but it's been a long and bumpy way there.

I have a paper, neatly typed and filed away, that I wrote a few semesters back that vehemently supports the teaching of *Huck Finn*. At the time, I didn't see the book as racist, a fact that is so obvious now, I can't believe I didn't see it then. I think it's hard for white people to recognize racism, especially when they're surrounded by other white people for most of their lives.

Although they made many good points, the black scholars included in *Satire or Evasion? Black Perspectives on Huckleberry Finn* (James S. Leonard, Thomas Tenney, and Thadious M. Davis, eds., 1992, Durham: Duke UP) really didn't persuade me. I find John Wallace's stance especially offensive and reactionary. His personally rewritten, "sanitized" version of *Huck Finn* is, in my view, a blatant example of censorship. If we're going to strip novels of what they are—the very words they're made of—then we might as well paint clothes on the nudes in the Sistine Chapel! *Huck Finn* is a mixed package, and we must either take it or leave it completely. Selective editing only masks the real problem.

For a long time, I thought that I could still teach this book, making racism the central topic of discussion in class, but I have now decided that this was a flawed idea. If I really want to teach and discuss with my students the issue of racism (which I do), there are much better texts to use than *Huck Finn*. Using it as a primary vehicle for discussing racism is a bit of a copout, considering that it was written by a white man and presents a rather ambiguous morality on the issue of slavery. By studying racism and this novel together, I almost feel that teaching about racism is being subordinated to the teaching of *Huck Finn*. In fact, incorporating discussions about racism becomes a justification for teaching the novel, not the purpose. At least for me.

If *Huck Finn* is used solely as a part of a unit on slavery or racism, we sell the book short. I love *Huck Finn*, always have, and while I accept the fact that it's racist, it's also many other things—breezy, hilarious, complex, and an adventure to read. As a teacher, I can't just present the racism in this book, discuss it with students, and then move on to talk about the "real" story, or the parts that I prefer. That undermines the seriousness of the race/slavery issue and does a disservice to the complexity of the novel. Racism isn't a subject that can be easily compartmentalized, and it would be very difficult to deal with other subjects addressed in the book after the issue of stereotypes is raised.

When one is confronted with the feelings of black students who can speak for themselves, all arguments, academic and otherwise, quickly grind to a halt. How am I supposed to explain to black students that they will be embarrassed/humiliated so that I can educate their fellow white students about racism? The whole idea seems racist at the core; once again, white students and their needs are being put first. And then there's the word, "nigger." As Peaches Henry cautions in *Satire or Evasion* (1992, "The Struggle for Tolerance: Race and Censorship in Huckleberry Finn," Durham: Duke UP, 25-48), I shared in "the incapacity of non-blacks to comprehend the enormous emotional freight attached to the hate word 'nigger' for each black person." I had no idea how ugly the word sounds read aloud or the charged atmosphere that results from it. Listening to black students tell me firsthand how it made them feel is what changed my mind. Now I think that it's not only insensitive but abusive to expect black students to sit quietly and be stared at while the word "nigger" is read aloud in their own classroom in 1993. I simply cannot do it, and won't.

On a larger level, I think that the *Huck Finn* controversy represents a lot more than even these issues. *Huck Finn* is considered by many (probably myself included) to be "the great American novel." And I think that the book is distinctly "American" (whatever that means!) for better, and often, for worse. *Huck Finn* is as much a part of American culture and mythology as the lore of Manifest Destiny and the lone cowboy. And it's just as flawed. Manifest Destiny was a grand and glorious idea that the West was ours (white America)'s for the taking. The Native Americans were only a small footnote to that story. *Huck Finn* is representative of the irreverent, rugged individual who "lights out for the territory" before he can be "civilized." The people who were denied that same freedom are allotted only a small and pleasant part of his story. And so there'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 *Huck 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 on to *Huck Finn* we're all making one last grasp for that old national identity that's on the way out.

Western Michigan University  
Kalamazoo, Michigan 49008
students and I would embark upon a lively and risk-taking exchange about race and its attendant complexities. (41–42)

An open classroom discussion of racial epithets in a mixed classroom of ninth graders with a sensitive and able black teacher clearly offers important opportunities for learning. With a different student population and a different teacher the results might have been less positive. Some teachers forbid the use of the word in the classroom and simply skip over it when the work is read aloud. Others speak the word only when they are quoting from a secondary source, such as the novel itself. Others use the expression “n-word” or “the racial epithet.” No approach is guaranteed, but whatever approach is taken it should be done explicitly and be discussed by the students. Discomfort with the

An open classroom discussion of racial epithets in a mixed classroom with a sensitive and able black teacher clearly offers important opportunities for learning.

word on the part of teachers or students may not be overcome by even the most sensitive approach and the problem of the racial epithet in the novel constitutes reason enough for some teachers to choose away from teaching the work. No teacher should be required to teach this novel. (The ethics of requiring teachers to teach Huckleberry Finn are explored by Wayne Booth in The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction [1988].)

Teach Huckleberry Finn or Not

There was a time when I thought it was silly not to teach Huckleberry Finn on the grounds that it was a racist novel. After reading and listening to African American scholars, teachers, parents, and students, I have changed my mind. Gerald Graff has urged English teachers to “teach the conflicts” (1992), and at teachers’ conferences in Oregon and Michigan, I have advocated using the novel along with other works as an opportunity for students to develop their own critical thinking about literature, racism, and the literary canon. Given the prominence of Huckleberry Finn in the curriculum, the attempt to teach it in a truly anti-racist way marks a starting point, a much needed improvement over business as usual. I realize that sometimes it is necessary for English classrooms to be uncomfortable and that if we fail to challenge established ways of knowing, contrast viewpoints, and broaden perspectives, we fail to do our job. Yet we must be careful that such discomfort is experienced equally rather than focused on an oppressed group that is desperately struggling for school success. It is timely for English teachers to look beyond Huckleberry Finn, to find other works that might be more appropriate for all our students and more effective in creating multicultural communities of learning in our classrooms. Educating white students about prejudice with a text that is alienating to blacks perpetuates racist priorities, does it not? There is no excuse for the fact that not even one of the most taught works in American high schools is written from a minority perspective. Why aren’t the great African American novels of Wright, Hurston, Ellison, or Walker more central to our teaching? Moreover, race is not the only disturbing issue when we consider the role of Huckleberry Finn in the classroom; we also need to ask other questions, about the novel’s treatment of women, for instance, about its effect on women students, and the overwhelming male orientation of our curriculum. I close with a quotation from Julius Lester:

[In Huckleberry Finn] civilization is equated with education, regularity, decency, and being cramped up, and the representations of civilization are women. . . . The fact that the novel is regarded as a classic tells us much about the psyche of the white American male, because the novel is a powerful evocation of puer, the eternal boy for whom growth, maturity, and responsibility are enemies. (1992, 205)

Western Michigan University
Kalamazoo, Michigan 49008

Works Cited


November 1993 33


The Idea Is the Thing

Some years ago I remember seeing a series of textbooks entitled How to Think in French and How to Think in Spanish. The titles aroused in me a sort of envy. If only we could teach our pupils how to think in English! This I believe to be the chief aim of the study of literature in the high school, not merely a knowledge of forms and types, of meters and styles, and of literary anecdotes, or even an appreciation of technical excellence. The idea is the thing. A knowledge of other matters is desirable, but only as a by-product.

* * *

If I were asked by a child what literature is, I should say, “It is a new pair of eyes—dozens of pairs—with which to see things you never dreamed of, and, what is still better perhaps, to see things differently which you have often seen.”

* * *

The knife with which to open a book is not the question of structure, plot, or style, but rather the question of the author’s point of view. What is his idea? The pupil should be taught to look for this first of all, whether the book is a novel, a play, or a poem. How did the author look at life?