

## Is Huckleberry Finn a Racist Novel?

**Many would shrug off this accusation against one of our great works of American literature as being ridiculous or just another example of our current trend of being incredibly “politically correct.” This may be true, but some of the following excerpts from an essay entitled *Racism and Huckleberry Finn: Censorship, Dialogue, and Change* could make you ponder the question more deeply.**

“*Huckleberry Finn* may be the most exalted single work of American literature. . . . 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.”

“. . . in November 1991 in a largely white suburb . . . 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.”

“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.”

“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. . . . 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. . . . Jim gives his impression of ‘King Sollermun’ and his harem in a minstrel-like repartee (ch. 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’ (ch. 8). Throughout the novel Jim is stupefied by information that Huck shares with him, as when they discuss Louis XVI’s ‘little boy dolphin.’”

“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. . . . 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.”

“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.”

“Jim never gains the intellectual complexity of Huck, never becomes a figure of disruptive alienation, nor ever seems capable of learning this from Huck. . . . 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 but equal.”

“According to [Toni] 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.’”

“The racial problematics of *Huckleberry Finn* are partly ‘corrected’ in the recently released Hollywood version (1993). . . . 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. Also enhancing the depiction of Jim is the elimination of Tom Sawyer. Without Tom, the scene in the second chapter where Jim is mocked by stealing his hat disappears.”

“Rather than serving as a contemporary testament to Twain’s greatness, the radically revised film simply points to significant problems in the original text.”

“One African American student was quite direct with me in the discussion [after I read the book aloud]. He pointed out that while this word may be used by blacks with other blacks, it simply could 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.”