

10-1-2009

Abandon *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*: Why Bother?

Johnny Duan '12

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.imsa.edu/fall2009>

 Part of the [Literature in English, North America Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Duan, Johnny '12, "Abandon *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*: Why Bother?" (2009). 2009 Fall Semester. Paper 6.
<http://digitalcommons.imsa.edu/fall2009/6>

This Sophomore Award Winner is brought to you for free and open access by the Award for Excellence in Expository Writing at DigitalCommons@IMSA. It has been accepted for inclusion in 2009 Fall Semester by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@IMSA. For more information, please contact pgarrett@imsa.edu, jean@imsa.edu.

Johnny Duan

Mrs. Townsend

Literary Explorations I, 13-15, Purple Pod

03 October 2009

Abandon Adventures of Huckleberry Finn: Why Bother?

Adventures of Huckleberry Finn has been an incendiary novel for decades; it has raised controversy in schools for at least half a century (Kim 1). Many have sought to remove it from literature classes, for various reasons, whether because of its racism, improper language, or alleged corrupting affects (Liechty). These arguments have not convinced the public to ban this book; none of the arguments used have been effective. There is no reason for us to break this trend.

Racism is commonly presented as an argument against the book (Kim 1). Detractors maintain that the negative views toward African-Americans harm our children (Liechty). The point that racism is prevalent in *Huck Finn* is certainly true, as evidenced by the notion that “sometimes people get hurt,” (Twain 185) but not when a black man dies. The implication that the black man isn’t human clearly demonstrates the callousness of the mid 1800s. Although this rampant discrimination is horrible, it is taught as fiction: it is not intended to be taken literally; it is only a window into the past, a past where slavery and hatred toward blacks was perfectly acceptable. *Huck Finn* should not be taken as an exercise in hate, but as a representation of the uncomfortable reality of a bygone era.

Inside the racism argument is the debate surrounding the word “nigger” (Powell). Black students have been vocal about its heavy use and have tried to stop the teaching of *Huck Finn* for this reason (Roberts). Granted, the use of “nigger” in *Huck Finn* is derogatory (Middleton), but

all racism that exists in the book is historical, not expressed directly toward the students. There is no reason for there to be so much agitation over reading one's own history, no matter how unpleasant it is (Duczeminski 1). If I were assigned a book exploring historical anti-Chinese sentiments involving racial slurs, I would not object. Shameful, offensive portions of history must be explored, even if only by virtue of being shameful and offensive. There is no convincing reason to remove a book from our curriculum simply because of the use of an offensive word in historical context.

Also, "nigger" is used in the black community as slang (Middleton) to refer to its own members. Granted, there's nothing wrong with the black community taking possession of a word referring to itself, but present here is an absurd double standard: society may not teach a book involving the historical use of "nigger", while the black community uses it practically as a pronoun (Middleton). This inconsistency is clearly present in the desire to not "...educate our kids in niggerology." (Roberts). This detracts from any argument against the use of "nigger." The black community will always have "rights" to words referring to themselves, but this doesn't mean that the general public can't utilize the word for academic purposes.

Another questionable aspect of this argument is the significance of the word in the first place. The purpose is not to "teach a word that's degrading and denigrating to a race..." (Roberts), but to teach history. The offending word is not the centerpiece of the novel: it is just along for the ride back to the 19th century; Mark Twain did not write it into the novel so many times to demean blacks. Its presence is only an artifact of the times, when racism against African Americans was the social norm. The significance of "nigger" in *Huck Finn* is overstated (Duczeminski 3).

Huck Finn's inclusion of morally corrupt characters is also commonly used to attack the book. For example, the duke and the dauphin use heinous tactics to milk people of their money, including a mock "Shakspearean Revival" (Twain 116), empty performances such as the "Royal Nonesuch" (Twain 126), and posing as a dead man's brothers to control his inheritance (Twain 133-171). Events such as these have long caused the book to be derided as "rough, coarse and inelegant...more suited to the slums than to intelligent, respectable people." (Alward). Again, this is not a relevant issue; these absurd actions are not promoted as "good." There is no aim to corrupt our youth in this novel. In this case, this immorality is presented in the style of a fable, a story used to "illustrate a particular moral and teach a lesson" (Aesop). Clearly, we are not intended to accept the heinous actions in the book as virtuous; we are to analyze what was wrong and what was right. High school students, certainly ones of our caliber, should be able to identify the unacceptable actions with much more speed and accuracy than the rest of our age group.

Apart from the lack of strong justification for the banishment of this book, *Huck Finn* certainly does have its uses. The book provides a window into antebellum America, representing various facets of life in that era. Although unpleasant, our history must be taught; even the darkest episodes of Nazi Germany are discussed in schools. History must be taught to further our understanding of our past, our society, others, and ourselves (Smith), no matter how uncomfortable it can be.

As mentioned earlier, *Huck Finn* can also be taught for morality. In spite of the horrible acts, moments of virtuous thought do show through. For example, Huck decides "All right, then, [he'll] go to hell" (Twain 179) instead of selling out Jim. In a moment of morality, he decides to go to Hell to keep Jim out of slavery. The recognition of Jim as a human whose wishes are to be considered is definitively condoned by the modern world and its concept of what is right. Both

the virtuous and shady acts can be used to further social responsibility, as examples of things to do and not to do, respectively.

Racism and immorality have long been used in attempts to remove *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* from high school English curricula. These arguments are not very salient: *Huck Finn* is a perfectly suitable book for teaching morality, and racism becomes academic when presented as history. In fact, these two subjects happen to be taught very well by the book. As such, there is no reason to remove *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* from the curriculum of IMSA Literary Explorations I.

Works Cited

- “Aesop’s Fables.” Aesop’s Fables. 1 Jan. 2005. 7 Oct. 2009 <<http://www.aesops-fables.org.uk/copyright.htm>>
- Alward, Mary M. “Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn: A History of Censorship for the Banned American Literature Classic.” Suite 101.com: Online Magazine and Writers’ Network 13 Jan. 2001. 7 Oct. 2009 <http://www.suite101.com/article.cfm/canadian_tourism/49239>
- Duczeminski, Mattlock, “Adventures of Huckleberry Finn is NOT Racist,” Associated Content. 30 Apr. 2007. 6 Oct. 2009 <http://www.associatedcontent.com/article/102521/adventures_of_huck_finn_is_not_racist.html?cat=9>
- Kim, Hyejin. “Black, White, and ‘Huckleberry Finn’: Re-imagining the American Dream.” *College Literature* 29.3 (2002): 182-183
- Liechty, John. “Who’s Afraid of Huckleberry Finn?” LewRockwell.com. 24 Jan. 2009. 3 Oct. 2009 <<http://www.lewrockwell.com/liechty/liechty25.html>>
- Middleton, Phillip and David Pilgrim. “Nigger and Caricatures.” Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia at Ferris State University. Sept. 2001. 4 Oct. 2009 <<http://www.ferris.edu/news/jimcrow/caricature/>>
- Powell, Alvin. “Fight over Huck Finn continues: Ed School professor wages battle for Twain classic.” The Harvard University Gazette 28 Sept. 2000. 3 Oct. 2009 <<http://www.news.harvard.edu/gazette/2000/09.28/huckfinn.html>>
- Roberts, Gregory. “‘Huck Finn’ a masterpiece – or an insult: Renton High revisits teaching of book after objections raised.” Seattle Post-Intelligencer 26 Nov. 2003. 3 Oct. 2009 <http://www.seattlepi.com/local/149979_huck26.html>

“The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn (Historical Context).” Answers.com: The world’s leading Q&A site. 7 Oct. 2009 <<http://www.answers.com/topic/the-adventures-of-huckleberry-finn-novel-4>>

Twain, Mark. Adventures of Huckleberry Finn. New York: Random House, Inc., 2001

Smith, Jim. “Home.” Why Teach History? 2008. 7 Oct. 2009 <<http://whyteachhistory.com/>>