

Huck at 100

The Nation, August 31, 1985

Born: November 30, 1835 in Florida, Missouri, United States

Died: April 21, 1910 in Redding, Connecticut, United States

Nationality: American

Occupation: Writer

Ever since it was published, exactly one hundred years ago, Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* has been a target of moral disapproval. Many of the novel's first reviewers found it disturbing and offensive. They called it, among other things, vulgar, inelegant, ungrammatical, coarse, irreverent, semi-obscene, trashy and vicious. The library in Concord, Massachusetts, promptly banned it, but the book soon won the affection of a large audience, and during the next fifty years critics, scholars and writers succeeded in rescuing it from the mincingly refined standards of what George Santayana aptly named "the genteel tradition." In the 1930s Ernest Hemingway praised *Huckleberry Finn* as the work from which all modern American writing stems, and T.S. Eliot later described Mark Twain's vernacular style as nothing less than "A new discovery in the English language." By the 1950s the initial objections to the novel had been dispelled, and it was quietly installed, along with *The Scarlet Letter* and some other "classic" American books, in the more or less standard high-school English curriculum.

But then, having survived the disdain of the genteel critics, the book became the object of another, angrier and more damaging kind of moral condemnation. In 1957 the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People called *Huckleberry Finn* racially offensive, and since then we have seen a mounting protest against this novel whose first-person narrator, the 14-year-old son of the town drunk, routinely refers to blacks as "niggers." Huck's repeated use of that demeaning epithet is enough to convince many black Americans that schoolchildren should not be required to read the book. (Another, somewhat less obvious reason for their disquiet is a certain resemblance between the novel's leading black character, the escaped slave, Jim, and the stereotypical minstrel-show darkie.) In the last few years the protest has been gaining adherents. In a number of cities across the country, indignant parents, educators and school-board members have demanded that the book be removed from the curriculum and even, in some instances, that it be banned from school or public libraries. This past year a group of black parents succeeded in having the novel taken off the list of required reading in Waukegan, Illinois, and John H. Wallace, an educator with the school board in Chicago, is now conducting a nationwide campaign against Mark Twain's greatest work, which he calls "the most grotesque example of racist trash ever written."

One result of this protest is that the centenary of *Huckleberry Finn* has been marked by a curious conjunction of celebration and denunciation. In March, when sheeley Fisher Fishkin, a literary scholar at Yale University, came to Mark Twain's defense, she attracted national attention to the dispute about his racial views. In an announcement treated as front-page news by *The New York Times*, she reported the authentication of an 1885 letter in which Twain offered to provide financial support for a black student at Yale Law School. There he wrote that "we have ground the manhood out of ... [black men] & the shame is ours, not theirs; and we should pay for it." (He subsequently did provide the money.) Because the letter reveals "the personal anguish that Twain felt regarding the destructive legacy of slavery," Fishkin evidently thought that it might help to overcome the objections of black people to *Huckleberry Finn*. The implication was that a man of such enlightened views could not possibly have written a racially offensive novel and that once those views were established, the controversy would be resolved.

But as it turned out, The Yale letter merely provoked the contending parties to recast their arguments in less compromising, more strident language. Thus sterling Stuckey, a historian at Northwestern University who is black, was moved to reaffirm the received scholarly-critical estimate of Mark Twain's masterwork. Of the letter he said that it "couldn't be a clearer, more categorical indictment of racism in American Life," and he went on to praise *Huckleberry Finn* as "one of the most devastating attacks on racism ever written." But Wallace, perhaps the novel's most outspoken critic, was unmoved by Fishkin's announcement. When asked to comment on the new evidence of Mark Twain's sympathy for blacks, he said that it "still does not mitigate the problems that children have with Huck Finn. . . . The book teaches blatant racism. . . . We ought to get it out the school reading list."

What shall we make of this unusual controversy? Unlike most issues of public policy involving opposed literary judgments, the current argument about the place of Huckleberry Finn in the public school curriculum does not involve censorship or First Amendment rights. Whether or not high-school students are required to read a particular novel has nothing to do with anyone's freedom of speech. (I am putting aside the very different and, to my mind, intolerable proposal to remove the book from school or public libraries.) Another striking feature of the dispute is the extremity of the antagonists' views. Most public quarrels about the merit of literary works turn on relatively subtle questions of interpretation, but in this case an enormous gulf separates those who consider Huckleberry Finn to be "one of the most devastating attacks on racism ever written" from those who denounce it as "racist trash"--who claim that it actually "teaches" blatant racism. At first sight, indeed, the two parties seem to be so far apart as to make the controversy irresolvable, and perhaps it is. But it may be useful, as a step toward a resolution, to consider why this novel lends itself to such antithetical readings. How is it possible for Huckleberry Finn to convey such diametrically opposed attitudes toward American racism?

The explanation should begin, I think, with a decisive though perhaps insufficiently appreciated fact: the racial attitudes to which this novel lends overt expression are not Mark Twain's, they are those of an ignorant adolescent boy. This fact also explains, incidentally, why evidence from other sources about what the writer, Samuel L. Clemens, may have thought or said on the subject of race (as in the Yale letter) proves to be largely beside the point. That a considerable disparity often exists between what writers believe and what their work conveys is an axiom of modern criticism. In the case of a first-person narrative like Huckleberry Finn, of course, Clemens's viewpoint is manifestly disguised, and can only make itself felt obliquely, in the voice of--from behind the mask of--the boy narrator, Huck.

In accounting for the ability of readers to arrive at radically opposed conclusions about the racial attitudes embodied in this novel, the importance of the first-person narrative method cannot be exaggerated. Every word, every thought, every perception, emanates from Huck or, in passages where other characters speak, is reported by him--filtered through his mind. Adventures of Huckleberry Finn is a tour de force of sustained impersonation. It is a tale told by a boy who is a vagrant and a virtual outcast, who has no mother (she is never mentioned), whose father is an illiterate drunk, bigot and bully, and who is inclined to accept society's view of people like himself as being, in his own words, irremediably "wicked and low-down and ornery."

Of course Huck calls black people "niggers"; for him to refer to them any other way would be inconceivable. But to say this can be misleading if it is taken to imply that the difficulty comes down to a mere question of usage, as if Mark Twain might have absolved his narrator (and himself) of the charge of racism merely by cleaning up Huck's vocabulary. The truth is that Huckleberry Finn is written from the viewpoint of a racist, or, to be more precise, a semiracist--a racist with a difference. The difference stems in part from Huck's exceptionally empathic nature (or, as Mark Twain puts it, his "sound heart") and in part from his disreputable upbringing on the fringe of antebellum Southern society. Unlike Tom Sawyer and his other friends whose parents belong to "the quality," Huck has been spared much of the formative influence of family, church and school. His racial prejudice is not supported by a sense of family or social superiority. On the contrary, he is a distinct outsider, a boy who is only half "civilized" or, in social science idiom, he has been incompletely acculturated. although he has picked up the received version of white racism along with other bits and pieces of the dominant belief system, that viewpoint has been less deeply implanted in him than in respectable children like Tom Sawyer.

In moments of crisis, accordingly, Huck comes up against the discrepancy between the standard conception of black people as "niggers"--a conception he shares--and what he has learned as a result of his direct experience with Jim. During such crises his inner struggle characteristically begins with an unquestioning endorsement of the culture's stock prejudices, but then, when he tries to enact them, he balks and, in consequence, he inadvertently reveals their inhumanity. When, for example, it suddenly occurs to him that his journey with an escaped slave will determine what people back home think about him, his first reaction is wholly conventional: "It would get all around

that Huck Finn helped a nigger to get his freedom; and if I was every to see anybody from that town again, I'd be ready to get down and lick his boots for shame." He knows what he is supposed to do if he wants the respect of law-abiding citizens, but the thought of turning Jim in calls up vivid memories of Jim's loyalty and friendship, and he finally decides that he can't do it; he would rather go to hell. The conflict between Huck's stock racist ideas and his compassionate nature exemplifies the way of controlling irony works: when he thinks he is behaving ignobly, we are invited to recognize his innate nobility. What makes the outcome so powerful is that the novel's readers are compelled to effect the ironic reversal. That Huck can acknowledge Jim's humanity only by violating the moral code of a racist society is an implication that the boy is unable to grasp or put into words. It is a thought that Mark Twain's readers must formulate for themselves.

But of course the centrality of that irony also explains why some readers consider Huckleberry Finn a racist book. For whatever reason, and one can imagine several, they mistake the hero's flagrant if erratic racism for the novel's--the author's--viewpoint. It may be difficult, admittedly, for admirers of this wonderful book to believe that an average, reasonably competent reader could fail to recognize that its satirical thrust is directed against slavery and racial bigotry, but it does happen. Leaving aside the incontrovertible evidence that some adult readers do miss the point, it must be emphasized that Wallace and those who share his views are not chiefly concerned about the novel's effect on mature, competent readers. They are concerned about its effect on schoolchildren, all schoolchildren, but especially black American children, whose special experience might very well hinder their responsiveness to the ironic treatment of racial oppression. How much do we know, actually, about the ability of teachers, or of children of various ages and social backgrounds, to make sense of ironic discourse? I have taught this book with pleasure to hundreds of college students, but I'm not at all confident about my ability to persuade a class of innercity adolescents--or any literal-minded adolescents, for that matter--that a book can say, or seem to say, one thing and mean another; or that in this case we should not be troubled by the fact that the hero calls black people "niggers" because, after all, that's what all white southerners called them back then, and anyway, look, in the end he is loyal to Jim.

And besides, what does one say about Jim? There can be no doubt that Mark Twain wants us to admire him; he is a sympathetic, loving, self-abnegating, even saintly, "Christ-like" man. But what does one tell black children about his extreme passivity, his childlike credulity, his cloying deference toward the white boy? Aren't these the traits of a derisory racial stereotype, the fawning black male? To overcome objections on that score, one would have to stress Jim's cunning and his occasional refusal to play the minstrel darkie, especially the great episode in which he drops his habitual pose of docility, if it is a pose, and angrily denounces Huck for making him the victim of a cruel joke. "It was fifteen minutes," Huck says about his reluctant apology, "before I could work myself up to go and humble myself to a nigger--but I done it, and I warn't very sorry for it afterwards, neither." It is a splendid moment, but is it splendid enough to offset the inescapable doubts of black readers about Jim's customary pliancy? Is it enough that Jim, the only black male of any significance in the novel, asserts his dignity in this one moving episode?

To raise these complex issues, it need hardly be said, is not to condone the denunciation of the novel as racist trash. But even if that opinion is as wrongheaded as I believe it to be, it does not follow that those who hold it are necessarily wrong about the inappropriateness of requiring high-school teachers to teach, and students to read, the Adventures of Huckleberry Finn. The point at issue, then, is the justification for that requirement. To claim that it should be required reading because it is a great American book is unconvincing: we don't require students to read most great books. Objections to the requirement becomes more understandable if we recognize the unique character of the niche Twain's novel tends to occupy in the high-school English course. It often is the only book that is centrally concerned with racial oppression.

All of which suggests that educators could take a large step toward resolving the current controversy simply by eliminating the requirement. This would open the way for the ideal solution: allow each teacher to decide whether his or her students should be asked to read Huckleberry Finn. It is the teachers, after all, who are best qualified to

make a sensible and informed decision, one that would rest on their confidence in their own ability to convey, and their students' ability to grasp, the irony that informs every word of this matchless comic novel.

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