The Case Against *Huck Finn.*

*Rick Shelburne*

Perhaps *Huck Finn* isn't overtly racist, but it may be subtly so. Consider:

1) Twain exclusively uses the word "nigger" to characterize Jim. Many scholars believe this was as negative a term in Twain's time as it is now. That Twain didn't use other terms extant at the time, when he easily could have, is problematical.

2) Although the entire book is written in dialect, Jim's dialect is clearly inferior to Huck's. Jim uses the constructions associated with the stereotypical Uncle Tom—the "yassir, massa" types. This is again problematical since Huck and Jim come from and live in the same environs. In fact, scholars say Twain modeled the dialect on black speech patterns. If so, shouldn't Jim speak the same way as Huck? Why are his speech patterns noticeably inferior?

3) Jim professes several superstitious beliefs not shared by the white characters. Some claim this is a natural outgrowth of his position as a slave; anthropologists say powerless people tend to invent supernatural forces to give their lives hope and meaning. Others believe this reflects a pejorative attitude towards Jim.

4) *Huck Finn* portrays Jim as the mental equivalent of a child or simpleton, not as an adult. One good example is Jim's belief that the man walking around calling himself a king is a king. Jim appears to have no idea what a king is, other than someone who declares himself a king.

In short, *Huck Finn* shows the Negro as meek, obliging, and subservient. Nowhere is there evidence of the intense pain, hatred, or despair felt by many slaves—the kind that made some of them kill themselves or kill their masters. Jim moans for his family once or twice and that's about it.

*Huck Finn* gives readers a distorted view of America: where the whites are generally kind and will help a black man if he deserves it. Where a black man can find justice if he acts as a "good" Negro should. What would have happened had Jim destroyed property or (horrors!) hurt a white person in his quest for freedom? Would Huck or the others have been as understanding? Would Jim have come out of it alive?

Now imagine you're a black student told to read this book. "They" tell you it's the Great American Novel, it's read in high schools across the country, and give you no other input. What are you supposed to think: that this was the way it was? That "nigger" was a commonplace term and that blacks were best served by grinning and bearing it? That the powers that be support this view by making *Huck Finn* the standard of American literature without qualification?

Even if *Huck Finn* represented the way it was (which it doesn't), it doesn't send the black student a very healthy message. Why not read the autobiography of Frederick Douglass?
or fiction by Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, etc.—that gives a better idea of slavery's evil? *Huck Finn* alone is a whitewashing of reality. Further, some scholars question whether *Huck Finn* should be considered great literature. They note that Twain wrote it installments for a boys' magazine and didn't even intend it to be a novel. Moreover, he made no distinction between it and *Tom Sawyer*—he considered both to be boys' adventures. Further, the scholars note problems with the text, such as the tacked-on ending. At the end, Huck is more or less the same as at the beginning. He hasn't come to some life-transforming revelation about how all men are the same, though the reader may have. It's not as if Huck's become an abolitionist who denounces the institution of slavery. Rather, his thoughts are directed toward squaring things with the adults. Jim is an afterthought, if anything. He hasn't taken on a new status as Huck's partner or confidante. He remains the object of Huck's adventures, not a person equal to Huck (like *Tom Sawyer*).

Consider Twain's portrayal of Jim, looked at through omniscient eyes, not those of the characters. Twain wrote in omniscient narration. Why doesn’t he show more depth to Jim? Even if you believe the argument that this is how whites at the time perceived blacks, if Twain were really arguing against slavery, as an omniscient narrator wouldn’t he have shown more to Jim than what’s given? You'd conclude that Twain believed blacks were fully equal to whites in all mental and emotional dimensions from *Huck Finn*?

Many have said that some black people survived by using a distorted dialect. If Jim were a living person, it's quite likely he would have talked this way. However, Jim is a character in a book written by a white person. This in mind, it is interesting to consider the difference in dialect between Huck and Jim. Why did Twain choose to deliberately emphasize this difference by phonetically spelling each word Jim says to the point where it is almost unintelligible? This is an authorial decision.

For example, Jim says, "I 'uz mos' to de foot er de islan' b'fo' I foun' a good place." Whereas Huck says, "There was a place right about the middle of the island I'd found when I was exploring." The contrast in their speech reinforces the notion that even an uneducated boy is easier to understand than even the most admirable black man. Given that most people associate standard English with intelligence (unfair as that may be), does this book not promote racist stereotypes among its readers? Many people are even more concerned with Twain's use of barely intelligible dialect for Jim given recent research indicating that Huck's dialect was modeled after a black boy Twain knew. If it is the case that Twain knew African Americans who spoke the way Huck did, why did he choose to write Jim's voice in such a distorted way? The above does not prove any malice on Twain's part, but it is worth considering.

Given the racial divisiveness in this country, which seems to be especially pronounced among our youth, is this the best book we could offer our students? And if it is offered, should it not be accompanied by some discussion of the effect the exaggerated portrayal of Jim as a "poor" speaker might have, or have had, on African- and European-American relations?
A second concern is the portrayal of Jim as an example of what an African-American male should be. He is continually referred to as a role model, and is probably the most beloved African-American male character in all of American fiction. Yet Jim is, as Toni Morrison says, "unassertive, irrational, dependent, inarticulate...." Shouldn't we examine the effects this has at large? What message does this send to the students reading the book?

Two things strike us in this 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.

Jim permits his prosecutors to torment him, humiliate him, and responds to the torment and humiliation with boundless love. The humiliation that Huck and Tom subject Jim to is baroque, endless, foolish, mind-softening—and it 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: because it would not have been possible for two children to play so painfully with the life of a white man (regardless of his class, education, or fugitiveness) once he had been revealed to us as a moral adult.

What people don't stress about the ending is that there is no way, given the confines of the novel, for Huck to mature into a moral human being in America without Jim. To let Jim go free, to let him enter the mouth of the Ohio River and pass into free territory, would be to abandon the whole premise of the book. Neither Huck nor Mark Twain can tolerate, in imaginative terms, Jim freed. (Toni Morrison's "Playing in the Dark")

The N-word
Consider the use of the word "nigger." Twain had other terms available to him, but he chose this and only this. This makes many African-American students and readers uncomfortable. Should we just ignore their sensitivity and continue to praise this book on its literary merit alone? Does literature exist in a vacuum?

On the word "nigger," from "Huck, Jim, and Racial Discourse" by David L. Smith in Satire or Evasion?:

Even when Twain was writing his book, "nigger" was universally recognized as an insulting, demeaning word. According to Stuart Berg Flexner, "Negro" was generally pronounced "nigger" until about 1825, at which time abolitionists began objecting to that term. (12) They preferred "colored person" or "person of color." Hence W.E.B. Du Bois reports that some black abolitionists of the early 1830s declared themselves united "as men....not as slaves; as 'people of color,' not as 'Negroes,'" (13) Writing a generation later in "Army Life in a Black Regiment" (1869), Thomas Wentworth Higginson deplored the common use of "nigger" among freedmen, which he regarded as evidence of low self-esteem. (14) The
objections to "nigger," then, are not a consequence of the modern sensibility but had been common for a half century before "Huckleberry Finn" was published.

Note that Smith also says, "[I]t is difficult to imagine how Twain could have debunked a discourse without using the specific terms of that discourse." But he isn't so naive that he believes "nigger" had no negative connotations in Twain's time (or before).

In their introduction to the book, James S. Leonard and Thomas A. Tenney add:

As for the frequent use of the word "nigger" in "Huckleberry Finn," it goes without saying that the word was at the time of Twain's writing, and remains today, a slap in the face for black Americans. It is inevitable that black children in a classroom with whites should feel uncomfortable with the word and a book in which it appears so often, and that black parents should wish to protect their children from what the word represents. In the classroom, "nigger" is embarrassing and divisive at any grade level.

Furthermore, Twain's body of work shows a pattern of ethnic slurs. From an analysis of *Roughing It*:

...[I]n another mood, he speaks irritably of Syrians and their sore-eyed children, who remind him of Indians: "These people about us had other peculiarities which I had noticed in the noble red man, too: they were infested with vermin, and the dirt had caked on them till it amounted to bark." He calls the Bedouins "Digger Indians," a mythical tribe invented by Americans to give full expression to their contempt.

Either every putdown in Twain's thousands of pages is part of an all-encompassing joke...or Twain meant what he said about Indians – "ignoble—base and treacherous, and hateful in every way" – foreigners, and blacks. Twain was a man of his times, perhaps slightly more progressive than average. He wanted to portray a Negro sympathetically, but he couldn't do better than making Jim a clown from one of his minstrel shows.

*Material Summarized from*

Shepherd, Stephen (Oak Leaf Staff Writer) "Was Mark Twain Racist?" New York: Oxford university Press. 1983

Smiley, Jane, "Say It Ain't So, Huck," Harper's, January 1996.