

## Un-Banning the Huckleberry

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### Abstract

Over the course of history, various groups have challenged, banned, and burned texts out of fear and the desire to control the thoughts and beliefs of a populace. Dictatorial regimes such as Hitler's Nazi-controlled Germany used "bonfires [to] 'cleanse' the German spirit of the 'un-German' influence of communist, pacifist, and, above all, Jewish thought" (Merveldt 524). Modern religious fundamentalism seeks to control a populace either through fear and indoctrination like the ultra-conservative, nearly-literal witch hunt of J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series when religious leaders of various Protestant denominations feared that the hit young adult book series would teach impressionable minds actual witchcraft. One of the most famous and still frequently taught banned books is Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. In this paper the argument is made for the teaching of banned books by a case-analysis of Twain's text that considers the historical context, positive and negative aspects of the text, the harm of censorship, the value of free speech, and how frequently-challenged texts promote critical thinking for students.

### Keywords

Huck, Twain, Huckleberry, race, language, critical thinking, high school, African Americans, freedom, speech, common core state standards, censorship, banned books, challenged books, slavery, book burning

Fernando Báez argues in *A Universal History of the Destruction of Books* that "the root of book destruction is the intent to induce historical amnesia that facilitates control of an individual or a society," and that the "[f]undamentalist biblioclast [the group that burns or destroys books] does not hate books as objects, but fears them for their content and does not want others to read them" (12-15). This is the case throughout history: dictatorial regimes such as Hitler's Nazi-controlled Germany used "bonfires [to] 'cleanse' the German spirit of the 'un-German' influence of communist, pacifist, and, above all, Jewish thought" (Merveldt 524). Modern religious fundamentalism seeks to control a populace through fear and indoctrination like the ultra-conservative, nearly-literal witch hunt of J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series when religious leaders of various Protestant denominations feared that the hit young adult book series would teach impressionable minds actual witchcraft. However, the battle over book banning is not only a political or religious one: it is also educational.

Teachers are held accountable in most states by the Common Core State Standards. In particular, the 11<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> grade standard for Speaking and Listening (SL11-12.1) states that students will do the following:

Work with peers to promote civil, democratic discussions . . . . Propel conversations by posing and responding to questions that probe reasoning and evidence; ensure a hearing for a full range of positions on a topic or issue; clarify, verify, or challenge ideas and conclusions; and promote divergent and creative perspectives. . . . Respond thoughtfully to diverse perspectives; synthesize comments, claims, and evidence made on all sides of an issue; resolve contradictions when possible; and determine what additional information or research is required to deepen the investigation or complete the task.

These outcomes are reasonable for preparing students for college or career, where any number of diverse, critical situations may occur and need analytical thinkers and team leaders; however, when local and federal spheres are at odds, there is — for lack of better expression — a catch-22.

When students are forced to confront their social norms, they enter the state of true critical thinking, thus challenging their parents' American ideal of (limited) free speech with the possibility of undermining the system. In her article published by the National Council of Teachers of English, Jennifer Rossuck outlines how she created a senior English elective course for her all-girls school on banned books and civic discourse as a response to a piece of legislation passed after a sex-education book stirred controversy. In her course of study, her students are required to uncover the following details about the text of concern: context, positive versus negative aspects, censorship as a form of denial, freedom of speech for the author, and respect towards students' common sense and critical thinking abilities (69).

This occurrence in 1994 sounds similar to a recent legislative battle in Kansas: the passage of Senate Bill 56 (2015) *Removing affirmative defense to promotion to minors of material harmful to minors for public, private or parochial schools* by the Committee on Judiciary states that teachers can be imprisoned for any material “harmful to minors” meaning anything that “the average adult person applying contemporary community standards would find that the material . . . Depicts or describes nudity, sexual conduct, sexual excitement or sadomasochistic abuse in a manner that is patently offensive” (2). As a result of this bill, the present-day biblioclast (book burner) is both politician and community member who has little to no experience in the educational sector. Furthermore, if the vague description of this person as the “average adult” is understood, this theoretical individual’s perspective of that which is “obscene” will vary across communities depending on whether or not they are more inclined to conservative or liberal ideologies. Classical works of art may be considered vulgar and pornographic in some communities and high art in others, and this legislation affects every classroom. To provide an example of what might happen if a teacher were disciplined for teaching *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, up until recently, Kansas teachers did not have tenure: one student with a complaint about one text could force even the Kansas State Teacher of the Year out of his or her job.

While this legislation died in the House Committee, it is without doubt that other challenges to the classroom will arise because a certain fundamentalism exists in challenges towards books taught in the classroom; parents and administrative ideologues fear the content of books but express a desire for students to become critical thinkers — a pedagogical and paradoxical decree, for if teachers exceed the community’s acceptable definition of critical thought (challenging one’s thoughts about the world), then the text stands heretical.

Therefore, it is imperative that discourse be made available that is understandable by this “average person” yet holds true to rigorous academic standards: If this unit study works for Jennifer Rossuck's students, it is sufficient to prove contested works such as Twain’s novel as both appropriate and critical for students in high school to read.

### **The Context of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn***

One of the first aspects that must be considered in the exploration of Twain’s text as a challenged book is its historical context. Controversial from its initial publication, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* challenged social mores when public libraries deemed its language offensive in 1885, and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) considered it racist in 1957 (Savo 4). It is these two affronts that provide the background for the immediate past and present challenges to the text: language and race.

Contest about language past and present centers upon vulgarities and the use of lower-class dialect. Later attention drew to the use of the racial slur “nigger,” which is used in the book 213 times (Rush 583). The earliest critics focused on language as a means of circumventing the contentious topic of race, and the Concord Public Library called the book “rough, coarse and inelegant” and that it was “more suited to so the slums than to intelligent, respectable people” (qtd.

in Fulton 54). However, Twain as his true self (Samuel Clemens) was both elegant and respectable in his day — even though he sought to shock and offend through satire to promote social change. On a variety of occasions, Clemens traveled with George Washington Cable who encouraged Clemens to censor himself (his use of the word “nigger” and “darky jokes”), and the two of them read a variety of passages from their anti-racial writings before public audiences (Pettit 131). For these reasons — Twain’s prowess of the English language, his ability to juxtapose the sentimental with the real, and the ability to incorporate regionalism that the book is considered canonical and quintessential American literature; however, as the country neared desegregation, the focus upon the book centered on its racist content.

The NAACP’s 1957 challenge to the novel’s racism continues to carry concern for today’s parents and students who confront the text as a tool for the disenfranchisement of African Americans. One of the most-recent challenges to *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* comes from Renton, Washington in 2004 when an African American student “complained to the school officials that the novel degraded her culture,” even though it sat on a list of “supplemental” (optional) reading materials; however, she still felt the need to file a complaint (Sova 6). Hers and others’ arguments reflect those of John Wallace’s assertions that called the book “the most grotesque example of racist trash ever written” (qtd. in Fulton 56). Despite the heated condemnation brought upon the text by critics for its prevalent use of the word “nigger,” Gregg Camfield points out that “some of the most spirited and interesting defenses of the book’s characterization of Jim [the slave] have come from black authors” (4). Some argue that Jim acts as a father figure or a brother to Huck, or they suggest that Jim manipulates Huck with his own mask of the stereotyped slave as a means of securing his own freedom. Nonetheless, others point out that “Huck’s emotional attachment to Jim can be characterized as cruel and indifferent” because towards the end of the novel Huck acts with complete “indifference to Jim’s welfare as he sits in the rat- and snake-infested pen” (Rush 590). Considering that not even African Americans or scholars can agree upon whether or not *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is, in fact, racist points to a need for further discourse, one that perhaps students should help carry.

Whereas both sides are debatable, Samuel Clemens himself supported African Americans and abolitionist causes; he advocated on behalf of Frederick Douglass and contributed to scholarships for black students at Lincoln University in 1882 (Pettit 125). Twain put his money where his mouth was; however, that mouth straddled both sides of the race debate, for while he contributed to scholarships and advocated for the rights of African Americans, he also told racist jokes before white audiences. Yet, “[f]rom the 1880s onward Mark Twain began to replace his old darky jokes with carefully selected readings about blacks, delivered before both black and white audiences” (Pettit 127), and this shows his awareness about race and care toward the topic; it appears that his sentimental intents conflicted with his reality: as a Southerner he had to maintain a facade. Therefore, it makes sense that his text supports such a duality and creates a comparative and combative discourse.

The oldest and newest challenges are the same: both elaborate upon the issues of social degradation — how the text either lowers the reader in social class (intellect) or depicts people of color within the text (racism). Such a text as this — for the sake of dialogue alone — lends itself to use by teachers, for there is room for debate by both white students and students of color about the book’s true message and societal value, allowing all students to reflect on their own perceptions of race and the depictions of the experiences of slaves while Huck and Jim travel down the Mississippi River. Overall, the historical context of both language and race as a means to censor this text fall short; though, these topics introduce some of the dialogue of positive versus negative aspects of the text.

### Positive Versus Negative Aspects of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*

To provide a perspective on the need to ban or to teach *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Susan E. Rush posits that Twain's text should be considered "anti-canonical," meaning that this quintessential American English literary study should be taught as an example "for understanding why society's values have changed" (580). From the perspective of both a parent and an educator she argues that some of the negative elements of Twain's novel, including its racist content, may harm more African American students and lead to the perpetuation of racist ideology through the entertainment of the white student than promote discourse and understanding. Her primary cause for this concern lies in the grade-level appropriateness of the text, as her own adopted (black) daughter read the text in middle school and felt disenfranchised, and she argues for a reading at the upper levels of high school or during a post-secondary course because she finds the text still valuable.

One positive aspect that Rush expounds upon is that Twain reflects regionalism via dialect and realism well within his writing. Moreover, while realism, regionalism, and dialect are important, "focusing on the issues of slavery or race is as important to white society — [if not] more important — than teaching it for style" (581). Furthermore, while the text is filled with satirical commentary, she expresses concern that "the novel is beyond the maturing intellectual abilities of most middle- and high-school students (Rush 581). Lastly, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* depicts the conflicting ideas of white supremacy and racial equality because of its anti-canonical value: "White society should no longer accept the normative value of the novel's message," which is "a message that is far more complex and racist than whites understand" (Rush 582).

These conflicting ideas of white supremacy and racial equality, which Rush highlights as a strength of the novel, are also the reasons Rush also feels that students are not mature enough to understand the anti-racist sentiment. Huck is not the hero he is made out to be, and most white teachers are not competent enough to recognize the prevalent racism in the book or Twain's own racist tendencies because "on some level, it is 'fun' for (white) students to read" about Huck's journey down the river; meanwhile, "multicultural education is intended to give students an appreciation of people different from them but not in the ways that *romanticize* the oppression of one group of people by another" (Rush 584-585). Ultimately, Rush argues that books like *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* should be read to show how terrible whites treated blacks and as a lesson from which we should never return; it should cause anger and frustration that Jim is the only well-developed black character, and "black students [cannot] identify with Jim because he 'is a character to laugh *at* and little more'" (588).

As a high school English teacher, I agree with Rush's concerns and praises, but I believe that the concerns justify the teaching of the text to upper-level high school students (eleventh and twelfth graders). Twain's text does require a readership of higher developmental ability. Not only is the regionalist dialect difficult to decode, but also middle school students are far too close to the age of Huck and prone to immaturity; it is far better that students be able to see his perspective in hindsight after they have had the opportunity to make their own mistakes and develop some wisdom that will also allow them to also see into Jim's views — however much or little that may be.

When Huck narrates, "I would do the right thing and the clean thing, and go and write to that nigger's owner and tell where he was; but deep down in me I knowed it was a lie — and He knowed it. You can't pray a lie — I found that out" (Twain 343), it is a passage that highlights the complex regional dialect, as well as the debatable development of Huck's character. Teachers think that this section teaches a moral lesson, but really, it is a lesson of ethics. Students must decode that Huck is experiencing an inner-conflict about slavery and whether or not to report to Jim's owner of his whereabouts; furthermore, he has a spiritual conflict about praying for Jim's freedom — a social taboo if one were a southerner because slaves were property, and Jim is stolen property that should

be returned to his rightful master. However, since Huck states that he does not believe much in God or religion, his prayer about Jim's freedom holds little weight in whether or not he's a reformed Southerner, for he does not believe in either the system of slavery or the system of religion he uses to convey his thoughts to the reader thus satirizing the whole dilemma and critiquing society as a whole. That is a lot for a high-performing student to keep straight, let alone a middle-school student, and this is one small quote from a lengthy text. Does it display Twain's racist tendencies? Yes, but he is depicting a reality with which he and his audience are familiar. Does it show the conflict between whites and racial equality? Yes, and Huck is trying to figure out his own identity and thoughts. Does it give a definitive answer? No, because as the analysis of the text notes, Huck is a flawed child with paradoxical views instilled upon him by others and assimilated by choice: He prays out of habit because Miss Watson and the Widow attempt to "civilize" him; he recognizes the injustice of the treatment of slaves, but his society shows him slavery is "normal." Therefore, Huck is as conflicted as the text itself.

Despite the label it is given (canonical versus anti-canonical), *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is a seminal text in the United States — for better more than worse, and as such it mandates analyses and remembrance of a time of oppression in history. There is no better sense of regionalism today than the racial gulf of interpretations of this novel. The book is valuable for teaching style and tone, and once those concepts are mastered, students should focus on the postcolonial lens and racism that perpetuates the text, practice close readings, determine if Twain is for or against slavery through his depictions of Jim and his interactions with Huck, and explore what the book says about the human condition and societal progress. And, if teachers fear that Twain's white perspective will land them in hot water, pair the text with African American writers like Richard Wright (*Black Boy*, *Native Son*) or Solomon Northup (*Twelve Years a Slave*) who give voices to people of color and slaves where Twain falls short.

### **Censoring *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* Denies the Reality of the Past**

When one looks to the past and present biblioclasy — the past biblioclast being that of the North afraid of language and African Americans offended by racism of a satirized (and sentimental) version of the antebellum South; the present biblioclast being politicians and the "average" citizen — it is evident that both groups past and present miss the point of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*: they fear the reality of a history of oppression and wish to romanticize the past in order to ignore the problems of the present.

Fulton mentions that critics of the text betrayed their own prejudices: like Huck, they too are "playing double." For example, while the editors of the *Republican* "condemn *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* . . . they betray their own fear of mingling with the lower orders, even aesthetically" because of the regionalist dialect (Fulton 56). He goes on to show how Twain intended for the racist language to disturb his readership — African Americans included — with the example of when "Sally Phelps asks Huck if anyone was hurt in the steamboat explosion and he answers, 'No'm. Killed a nigger'" (Fulton 56). Acknowledging that this way of life existed, that whites treated slaves like cattle and placed such little value upon the lives of blacks — this strikes fear into those who seek to avoid future persecution or reminders of past mistakes. The white reader wants to believe that he is for racial equality and in no way (past or present) perpetuates racism; the black reader wants to forget the past and improve the present: these are also examples of "playing double." Even Twain plays double; his pen name of Twain to that of Samuel Clemens, and America had two identities: the North and South. As such, today there are now two identities in this discourse: the past and the present. All these identities act as a means of survival and avoidance of the real issue of race and the still-present need for societal change.

By erasing *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* from the canon due to its racial prejudices, the current biblioclast of politicians and average citizenry hopes to further liberate themselves from the racial terms found within the text. In an unprecedented move in 2011, the Alabama publishing house NewSouth books sought to expunge all occurrences of racist language — “nigger” and “injun” — and replace the terms with more politically correct language such as “slave” (Page). The rationale behind this censorship was to circumvent problems before they arose with the text, a means of making it less controversial and more readable. However, this censorship perpetuates the problem of which Twain is accused: Critics claim that he romanticizes the past in the South and that the use of the word “nigger” desensitizes and promotes racial prejudices, but omitting the word and all its enormity further adds to the sentimentality through omission. In other words, deleting “nigger” from the text is a means of saying that America had no such problem and that it is not even appropriate to discuss how it is used in the novel. Furthermore, this deletion would deny the terrible state from which the United States developed, and even the replacement word “slave” lessens the weight of the problem of racism in America. This is not like the reclaiming of a word; it is a murder of identity, one that the South and white society must recognize it placed upon blacks, and an identity that it must also help heal.

This shows the need for freedom of speech and for critical thinkers: If society forgets the past degradation of a people seen as Other (racially), then there is no groundwork to prevent future discrimination toward those who are Other (sexually, mentally, physically, etc.). The deletion of an epithet (“nigger”) is not a solution so long as words like “chink,” “fag,” “retard,” and “gimp” continue to define Others in society and limit their agency, and Twain’s prevalent use of shocking satire as a means of drawing attention to issues shows the need for freedom of speech today. Teens today are all-too aware of prejudices in an era where tensions and bullying rates are higher than ever: Latinx students are told to move back to Mexico beyond a proposed border wall – even if they are legal citizens; Muslim students’ extended families face travel bans; LGBT+ students see rollbacks on protections from the Department of Education. Racist language, charged language, and oppression are not going away, and students need to be instructed on how to analyze a situation and the language at hand.

### Twain’s Freedom of Speech

During his life, Twain advocated for equality and the fair treatment of not only African Americans at home, but also those of color abroad. Not only did he aid Frederick Douglass and provide scholarships for black students, he also critiqued the treatment of people of color around the world. Regarding his tours and lectures on race, Twain remarked:

In more than one country . . . we have hunted the savage . . . with dogs and guns through woods and swamps for an afternoon’s sport, and filled the region with happy laughter over their sprawling and stumbling flight, and their wild supplications for mercy . . . In many countries we have . . . made him our slave, and lashed him every day, and broken his pride, and made death his only friend, and overworked him till he dropped in his tracks. (Pettit 133)

While Twain used his humor and satire to mock slave owners and the South as well as to encourage reforms, when it came time to be serious Twain became blunt with his message.

It is true that Twain waxes sentimental in his depiction of the South in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*; however, the voice he gives Huck is enough to lead to tarring and feathering if said to the wrong group of Southerners. Over the course of the novel Twain expresses his freedom of speech through Huck.

The first notable instance of this free speech is when Huck and Jim become separated in a fog, and Huck plays a trick on Jim for which he is later sorry. Huck says, “It was fifteen minutes before I could work myself up to go and humble myself to a nigger — but I done it, and I warn’t

ever sorry for it afterwards, neither” (Twain 150). With no outside influence to promote his self-censorship (like Tom Sawyer), Huck equalizes himself with Jim.

A second instance of this free speech is when Huck states, “I knowed [Jim] was white inside” (Twain 287), thus, showing a critical reader that while raised in the racist antebellum south, Huck is capable of change, and that is why the Southern biblioclast fears him, and it is why Huck fears the Southern biblioclast. Huck is aware that this is a face he can only wear toward Jim, for whenever Huck is around Southerners, his regard for Jim’s wellbeing vanishes. As mentioned earlier, Twain also self-censored depending upon his audience; therefore, it makes sense that Huck does too.

By deleting Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* from the canon (or anti-canon) of literature, society says that his voice and views do not matter; that racism was and is not still a problem; that America is not conflicted about how citizens treat one another; that Twain did not help start this dialogue. Twain’s advocating for reform is seen in the text, but as he, like his characters must put on multiple faces, the text at times turns sentimental; however, this is permissible, for Twain enjoyed speaking his mind and creating arguments, and it is with this text that he begins a dialogue among readers and scholars that continues to this day. It is a dialogue that students must use critical thinking to help continue to solve.

### **How *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* Promotes Critical Thinking**

Huck’s dilemma is a universal one that models all recurrent instances of oppression and societal nonchalance and apathy towards change. Current instances of oppression are seen in a variety of societal contexts in America alone: the Black Lives Matter movement shows how police corruption continues to perpetuate the problem of race; the failure of congress to pass housing and work protections for persons who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT), such as the Employment Non-Discrimination Act (ENDA) hearkens back to the rhetoric of separate-but-equal and white flight; the targeting of Muslims out of xenophobic fear of Islamist extremism are but a few examples of how Huck’s conflicted mind on race reflects the conflicts faced by current generations. During class discussions, my own students bring up these topics because they hear about them in the news or halls, and in some cases, disagree with their own parents’ sentiments, and the safe space of the class guidance through this text allows for them to work through these issues and their own cognitive dissonances regarding race and other forms of discrimination. By the end of the book, the majority of students find it valuable, and even those who disagree with its inclusion in high school tend to reflect more of an anti-canonical approach and advocate for its value in post-secondary education.

When Huck experiences a cognitive dissonance between his society’s expectations for his behavior and how he feels he should treat Jim, his thoughts and reflections upon the world provide a framework for current students. When he does not preach, he shows the errors of others’ ways, and it is this critical discourse that needs to happen for change to be successful: the reader must be able to stop and declare the injustice, think about why the situation makes one sick. If Huck can make the connection that Southerners act in a manner that is “enough to make a body ashamed of the human race” (Twain 280), an extension can be made from Twain’s work to the world. Huck and Twain may revert to sentimental ways, but students today do not have to: they can be the voice of change.

### **Conclusion**

The text of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* helps to justify the reading of banned books and highlights their importance to the instruction of critical thinking in public education. Censorship on behalf of language and race eliminates a discourse that is still relevant to the classroom; it is neither anti-intellectual to read a text with dialect, swearing or racial slurs if discussed

both within context of the novel's historical setting, author's background, and current relevancy, for it provides a safe place for students to express concerns about and problem solve social issues — a mandate of current curriculum instruction within the Common Core State Standards. It is for these same reasons that the negative aspects of the book lend to positive use for instruction: *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* reflects the conflicting world view of Twain (sentimental and rational) and today's conflicting views toward race and Other groups in society. It shows how people and institutions make mistakes in how they treat Others and invites the reader into a discourse of how to make society a better place now and for future generations. Regardless of its offenses, one must understand that censoring the past omits the shames and obstacles that current society overcame and still confronts. Refusal to talk of language and of race denies the reality of the past and denies freedom of speech. Freedom of speech mattered to Twain — a freedom he expressed, regardless of whom it vexed — and it is this same freedom which promotes and fosters critical thinking within today's students who need not be protected but be guided to making their own decisions about the issues of language and race, for far too long scholars and teachers carried the discourse, and it cannot be clearer than it is in the Common Core State Standards (SL11-12.1) that students need to have “civil, democratic discussions,” over “a full range of positions on a topic,” that offers “diverse perspectives” that requires them to “resolve contradictions.”

*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is an example of such a text that offers students the opportunity to commit to these higher standards, confront their own perspectives, and challenge those of their parents and their community. They too are part of the ongoing fight in a biblioclastic system that claims to espouse the necessity of free speech as a means of ideological control. High school students should be allowed to analyze banned and challenged texts, and the institutions must support the teachers who engage students in critical thinking and civil discourse, even if it frightens political or citizen biblioclasts. For free speech to exist, critical thinking must first be allowed.

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