

Censoring *Huck Finn*

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It's a classic or better yet, a masterpiece. It appears on academic reading lists year after year, it paves the way for modern literature, and it can be referred to for nearly any literary analysis. This great work is Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. So, with so much applause for the novel, why has English professor Alan Gribben partnered with NewSouth Books to publish it in a new version? Simple. He wanted to remove the forbidden "n-word," "nigger," from its pages. In a January 2011 article by Marc Schultz for *Publishers Weekly* titled "Upcoming NewSouth *Huck Finn* Eliminates the 'N' Word," Gribben comments that "This is not an effort to render... *Huckleberry Finn* colorblind. Race matters in these books. It's a matter of how you express that in the 21st century" (qtd. in Schultz). I absolutely agree that in today's world we should be careful about what we say and how we say it, because we all come from different backgrounds and cultures. But how far is too far? If Gribben and people like him have their way, might we soon be reading books with entire sentences, paragraphs, or even pages blacked out so as not to "offend" anyone?

According to Gribben, his idea comes from his experience teaching the novel as an English professor in Montgomery, Alabama, where he replaces "nigger" with "slave" when he reads *Huckleberry Finn* aloud (Shultz). America has a history of banning books for contentious topics: sex, profanity, and inappropriate content. Basically, we try to hide anything that raises a red flag as potentially inflammatory; we conceal controversial topics instead of confronting them and allowing students to ponder them in full. Unfortunately, this practice hinders our youth and their ability to digest the complexity of the world.

For more than fifty years now, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* has been banned in grade schools, taken off library shelves, and been one of America's most challenged novels (Brown; "100 Most Frequently Challenged"). The reason why? *Huckleberry Finn* addresses one of America's deepest problems, the conflict of race, and the mere fact that the word "nigger" appears over 200 times throughout the novel is certainly cause for concern. Of course, "nigger" is crude and discriminatory, but Mark Twain did not use it to insult the black race; he used it to depict the time period and vernacular of a scene in the old South along the Mississippi River before the Civil War. In her January 9, 2011, *Washington Post* article titled "Leave Twain Alone," Kathleen Parker argues that taking words out of books not only hurts the stories they tell, but also the minds of those who attempting to engage and learn from these stories:

[T]hese writers selected each word painstakingly to create a world they envisioned necessary to their purpose. That the world has changed, and our language with it, is no argument for rewriting or reconstructing the creator's intent. To do so is both an assault on intellectual property that should be sacrosanct, and an insult of those whose minds we attempt to mold.

Parker is exactly right. Not only does changing the language in one of America's best known classics hurt the story and how it is read and viewed, but it makes the bold assumption that readers can't handle the messages the author offers. We read for a purpose, whether leisurely or intellectually, and authors write for a purpose. If we censor authors' words, we censor their purpose, and their readers' minds can never be opened for further exploration of the world.

Although many agree removing the word "nigger" from a novel that exemplifies historical American culture seems quite unreasonable, both "slave" and "nigger" represent an aspect of America's past—slavery—that still has its open wounds; because of these open

wounds, the other view of this controversial issue is certainly nothing to skip over. Taking into consideration that Gribben teaches in Alabama, it can be assumed that he is well aware that slavery is still a sensitive topic. Teachers have to report back to parents and answer to the principal on a daily basis. When dealing with children, certain topics and words have to be used carefully in order to allow provide students to absorb their true meaning or value. If teachers fail to muffle controversial content in the classroom for the sake of avoiding conflict, they face potential scrutiny from those parents, the possibility of shutting down a student's confidence in the classroom, or the prospect of losing their jobs. It's unfortunate that an educator has to fear being fired when trying to enlighten students about controversial topics. In today's society, though, it's a challenge to satisfy every individual because we have all been taught differently and exposed to different ways of thinking about diversity. Some have open and accepting minds, while others have yet to be exposed to the diversity and problems of the world.

Reflecting the supportive side of the spectrum in this controversy, it is obvious that "nigger" should not be used freely or ignorantly. Every individual has to address this sensitive word with caution because of its context, but using it appropriately in a classroom to expose our history can only be beneficial to students. Young students in elementary schools have been exposed to the concept of slavery since they began American history; *Huckleberry Finn* is typically assigned to students in the high school. In other words, students would have been aware of the issue for years, and reading the novel would only help to cultivate knowledge about America's hard past, especially seeing offensive vernacular like "nigger." I would think removing the "n" word would be insulting to African Americans because it tries to hide a dark period they endured. Michiko Kakutani, thirty-year *New York Times* book critic, affirms this point in her January *Times* article, "Light Out Huck, They Still Want to Sivilize You": "To

cancel or redact books on school reading lists is a form of denial: shutting the door on harsh historical realities—whitewashing them or pretending they do not exist.” Educating students with novels like *Huckleberry Finn* should be looked at in a positive light. If we can’t talk about complex topics with students in grade school, how can they be prepared to enter higher education where deep and diversified thinking is expected?

In considering *Huckleberry Finn*’s significance for revealing the past, it is important to note how many responses Gribben’s new edition has generated. As Mark Memmott points out in his NPR news blog article titled “New Edition of *Huckleberry Finn* Will Eliminate Offensive Words,” “*Huckleberry Finn* is a trending topic at this moment.” Memmott is talking about Twitter, but his comment applies more generally. Countless articles have been written in the past few months both for and against Gribben’s revision of Twain’s novel. Many are from major world publications; these are intelligent people forming opinions and reporting their thoughts and ideas openly. Along with professional writers, everyday individuals are responding on Twitter, commenting in blogs, and voicing how they feel, whether they agree or disagree. The very thing Gribben wanted to conceal, the “n” word, is being discussed frequently and publicly.

The fact that so many people have so much to say about sanitizing the novel is itself an argument against sanitizing the novel. Another *Washington Post* article bluntly titled “Why a New Edition of *Huckleberry Finn* is Wrong to Remove the N-Word,” by Alexandra Petri, reads, “We don’t have to read it out loud, but it’s worth knowing the word is there.” I understand Gribben’s point that expunging “nigger” from the book will perhaps make the books more “classroom friendly,” but where is the education in that? Petri acknowledges such a valuable point: the word does not have to be said, but just knowing it is there allows us to recognize that it existed. On a grander scale beyond Twain’s novel, what goes into a student’s history textbook is

a topic of debate year after year. What is in a text determines what a student learns. If significant but controversial history is left out, students can never engage its importance and can never form their own opinions. *Huckleberry Finn* acts much like a history textbook: removing the word is like removing a part of history. Petri observes that *Huckleberry Finn* has a unique quality “because it is of its time yet manages to transcend it.” At its heart, *Huck Finn* exposes the inhumanity of slavery through the power of literature; that alone speaks volumes.

At the expense of tampering with an American classic, Gribben says, “I’m hoping people will welcome this new option...” (qtd. in Schultz). It is not that Gribben doesn’t support the novel; he is fully aware of its legacy and what it offers in terms of plot and history. But he worries that the single word, “nigger,” has the potential to ruin *Huckleberry Finn*’s value. Gribben is correct in his beliefs that for public schools, educators must be extremely cautious with their material; however, we cannot tiptoe around the obvious: America has a past, a past that generates both positive and negative emotions. If *Huckleberry Finn* is defined simply by the use of a word, we lose the importance of the novel itself, a story that captures the essence of our past and acknowledges an important time period for many Americans.

In “Leave Twain Alone,” Kathleen Parker brilliantly writes, “The purpose of reading isn’t just to run words past a pupil’s pupils but to enhance understanding and reveal truth through what we call ‘teaching.’” Teachers and schools feel it’s necessary to avoid conflict altogether by not exposing students to a novel that stirs up so much emotion from a single word. But educators have the opportunity to impact lives in a way that most do not. They are able to empower individuals with knowledge, a gift that makes life so much richer, and that positions them to be contributing members of society. Our world challenges us every day in ways we often cannot

understand. The only way to be prepared is to be enlightened and educated; covering up what might harm us can only produce weakness and ignorance of the world.

Despite the desires of those who wish to challenge the language in this classic text, the educational importance of *Huckleberry Finn* outweighs the need to be “politically correct.” Sanitizing *Huckleberry Finn* takes away from a central charge of education: to engage individuals in thinking about complex and debatable topics that matter in the real world. Denying students the opportunity to think critically and to engage in conversation that requires deep intellectual thought is a disservice not only to students, but to the world, as each one of us thrives off of learning from the next.

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