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The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn: African American Perspectives

Some consider *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* to be the greatest novel in American Literature. Did Mark Twain write this novel to attack racism and educate readers about our country's past? I would like to think that Twain supported diversity. Some find the novel racist and offensive and believe that "its appearance in the classroom today tends to reinforce racism" (Leonard 6). The argument we see here has caused a lot of controversy. Angry Americans want the novel to be banned from schools, and re-examined as a whole. I decided to focus on the African American perspective of the issue because I assumed that most literary knowledge we look at today usually comes from the white perspective. When I learned that many African Americans were insulted by the novel, I wanted to know why a so-called masterpiece could affect people in such a negative manner. Why have some African Americans branded this novel "racist"? I have researched the answer to this question and investigated what types of changes have occurred as a result.

When I was exposed to *Huckleberry Finn*, I did not find it overtly racist. I felt that Twain's original intention for the novel was to make the reader examine and explore racial concerns. Did Twain meet this challenge successfully? Let's consider how he develops his characters. Twain's novel tells the tale of a young boy, Huck, who goes against society's ideals to help Jim, an escaped slave. The standard approach to defining this relationship assumes that Huck is the hero. Huck's character, therefore, becomes the central part of the story, but this leads to a problem concerning race. Why does Twain give a young, white boy a higher merit than a grown black man?

We just have to look at the concept of the struggle for identity. Twain may have used racial cliches so the reader could understand the environment in which the story was written. In the 1840's, there was a problem with slavery and the dehumanization of blacks. Jim was able to dismiss this problem by accomplishing his goals and gaining freedom. So, if we think Huck is the hero, we are wrong. When looking at the concept of the hero, we now see Jim as the hero, whose character represents a metaphor for the victory over the "white man."

The atmosphere throughout the novel also struck me into believing that Twain was trying to enforce race relations. During Jim's escape, he and Huck travel down the Mississippi River. This adventure down the Mississippi is symbolic and reflects an important theme. The deeper the two travel down the river, the deeper their friendship becomes. Twain's realistic depictions of race relations were important for readers of the time, as well as readers of today. We can look at the relationship between Huck and Jim as a means to help bridge the racial gap.

This book is about freedom and the quest for freedom. It is about a slave who risks his life to win his freedom, and a white boy who befriends him and helps him escape. Huck starts out believing that slavery is normal. Eventually, Huck will fight his conscience and realize that he would rather go to hell than betray his friend. Twain brings his own feelings about slavery in the novel. Huck was told that if he did not report

a run-away slave, he would go to hell. He decides to write a letter reporting Jim, but ends up ripping the letter up. He figures he will just have to go to hell for not reporting Jim's disappearance. This brings slavery to a different level, a level in which we can laugh at slave owners for being so dependent and threatened by the idea of "losing" a slave. Twain has used satiric intent in order to show the extent of ignorance that came from whites.

In many scenes, Twain uses the word "nigger," which is offensive to black readers. Many characters use this word because the action of the book takes place in the south 20 years before the Civil War. There is no question that the word was used during this time. Throughout the novel, Twain uses his dialogue very casually. He does this to underscore the cold truth about the south. During this time in history, all whites were considered nice people. Let us keep in mind that this was a society in which these "nice" people did not consider the death of a black person worth their attention.

Twain presents Jim as a man with of courage and nobility. However, Twain's description of Jim is sometimes considered belittling and negative by present-day standards. Why is Twain criticized for representing Jim as a caricature? Has Twain perpetuated cheap slave-era stereotypes? Jim is hardly a caricature. Actually, he is the moral center of the book. Jim's character brings to light an important theme of *Huckleberry Finn*, which is freedom. By looking at Jim's character, we can see that he is a slave. But by looking deeper into Jim, we see that he is the freest character in the novel. Unlike other characters, Jim always follows his conscience and stays true to his morals. This makes him free long before his owner frees him.

Although Jim was labeled as a slave, he was not constrained by slavery. He made decisions based on his ideals, regardless of the effect it may have had on his own well being. Jim's ideas of right and wrong were definitely passed on to Huck. They became the closest during the middle of the novel when they ventured down the Mississippi River. As the two develop a friendship, Huck is influenced by Jim to re-evaluate what he was taught about right and wrong, especially what he was taught about slavery. Huck will eventually do what he thinks is right, opposed to what society says is correct. Jim can, therefore, pass as a father figure to Huck, for he teaches Huck important lessons about life.

Twain is able to educate people through means of writing, which is very powerful. During the time in which the novel was written, literature was the main learning tool. People in the late 1800's we either strongly for, or heavily against *Huckleberry Finn*. One anonymous writer for *The Atlanta Constitution* expressed their feelings about the novel the year it was written in 1885. This was an important year because there were many mixed feelings about whether or not the novel was "suitable" for readers. The writer looks at the novel from the artistic perspective:

"From the artistic point of view, there is not a coarse nor vulgar suggestion from the beginning to the end of the book. Whatever is coarse and crude is in the life that is pictured, and the picture is perfect. It may be said that the humor is sometime excessive, but it is a genuine humor--and across every page, teaches the necessity of manliness and self-sacrifice."

I value this excerpt because it sums up what Twain valued in his writing, which is resolution. Although some moments in *Huckleberry Finn* lacked historical accuracy,

they more importantly rendered conflicts. And these conflicts were solved through companionship.

Conflicts rise a lot throughout the novel. When Huck becomes attached to Jim, a conflict arises. What Huck is taught by society is different than what his own conscience is telling him. Twain creates this contrast in order to teach acceptance. Huck goes against society's morals and realizes that a person's race should not determine their worth. This can even teach society to re-evaluate their individual ideals. Twain also creates conflict between other characters. There are many characters that are selfish and needy, such as Huck's father. These characters represent cruelty and coldness and exist in contrast to Huck and Jim. This is important because the two friends represent loyalty and sacrifice, and Twain does this to portray the positive characteristics that all people should embody.

By becoming a best seller, it is evident that *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* has reached out to number of people. But times have changed, especially since the 1950's. I decided to find out if Twain's literature could be considered educational when taught in schools. I interviewed a woman who was a teacher at a high school in Chicago. Five years ago, she taught *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* to her English class. My main focus was to determine how the language affected, or had an effect, on the students in her classroom.

She explained that African American parents have been concerned over the years with the teaching of the novel because their children may be apt to feelings of discomfort. The frequent use of the word "nigger," she continued, may cause damage to the self-esteem of black youth, as well as obstruct their learning. The teacher concluded by saying that racial slurs offended both black and white students in her classroom. Therefore, the class was able to discuss *Huckleberry Finn* without the black students feeling separate from their white classmates. Her students were also able to separate the dialect's educational use from its emotional effect. That way, she could teach the novel in her class by keeping in mind the context of the time in which *Huckleberry Finn* was written. She did not have to worry about whether or not the language was too strong.

I read an intriguing essay written by Charles H. Nilon entitled "The Ending of *Huckleberry Finn*: 'Freeing the Free Negro'" from the text, *Satire or Evasion? Black Perspectives on Huckleberry Finn*. Nilon did not believe that *Huckleberry Finn* was a moral novel because Twain mocked Jim's freedom in the end. He stated that literature could not separate itself from morality. The reader will always be taught something, and in this case, Nilon learned that Twain's literature was offensive to African Americans. Objecting to this, I took another look at Jim's character. For a twenty-first century reader, nineteenth-century enslavement may seem vague. I can recall my History classes in school, and realize that I rarely discussed the atrocities of slavery. Whether or not it was ignored for a reason I will never know. I do know, however, that just because Jim was free did not mean that his freedom was absolute. In the nineteenth-century, blacks did not have the freedoms that whites did. In order to attack racism, I think Twain ridiculed Jim's freedom to profess that changes still needed to be made in America.

After a long struggle with oppression and slavery, *Huckleberry Finn* has presented a negative image of the black race to the black race with its dehumanizing language. The word "nigger" appears over 200 times, which may seem unnecessary to be included in a novel where the theme is ambiguous in the first place. I wanted to know

what an African American scholar felt about the frequent use of racial slurs in literature. I took a look at page 22 of Langston Hughes' autobiography, who is an admirable writer that examines race subjectively:

“The word *nigger* to colored people of high and low degree is like a red rag to a bull. Negroes do not like it in any book or play whatsoever, be the book or play ever so sympathetic in its treatment of the basic problems of the race.”

Hughes states that this word has, and always will, cause problems for African Americans. He declares that the use of the word “nigger” is considered derogatory, and should never be used. However, we hear the word today used by African Americans. If the word continues to be used in a person's dialect, why does it still cause problems in an informal setting such as the classroom?

Reflecting off of Hughes' passage, I feel that Twain purposely used strong language in order to avoid the cliched pity or sympathy that white writers gave to blacks. I found myself thinking, is it better to be “good” and abide by the rules, or to do what is right, regardless of repercussions? Twain may have felt that it was right to represent African Americans the way he did. As Americans, whether we are black or white, we cannot ignore what happened in the past.

African Americans who oppose the novel argue that Jim's character was created in order to depict blacks as half-witted and foolish. Some consider Jim's use of language to be at the equivalency level as that of a child. Did Twain write in dialect for a reason? Twain's use of dialect causes problems because the whole novel was written in this form. However, Jim's dialect is clearly inferior to that of Huck's. If Jim and Huck come from the same surroundings, does this place a stereotype on Jim's character? I am certain that Twain studied black speech patterns to form Jim's dialect. I researched black speech myself and found that slaves used a code to communicate with one another. This way, their masters would not be aware of what they were talking about. Many slaves survived by using this distorted dialect.

Huck's speech may have been easier to understand throughout the novel, but this does not give means to label Jim's character as inferior. Many people may associate “proper” English with intelligence. During the time in which the novel was written, Standard English was not a concern among a racially divided society. We can even see that today, in a society where Standard English barely even exists anymore! Twain was merely writing for his readers. In his ability to represent a commendable African American character, he was restricted. As readers now, we need to keep in mind that any stereotyping present in this 19th century text was not meant to criticize anyone.

Ralph Ellison is an example of an African American who valued Mark Twain's writing. Twain's literature spoke to Ellison as a means to show both blacks and whites that his writing was not only meant to entertain the reader, but to edify the reader as well:

“Well, for one thing, Mark Twain, as against so many other writer, knew more about the country. He knew something of its geographical and cultural variety. And being from the section of the country from which he came, he knew something about my own people” (Ellison 134).

Ellison expresses the idea that all Americans can benefit from reading Twain's work. By understanding African American history, we can learn where, and how, African Americans have conquered the pride and strength to live productive lives today.

In 1885, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* was published with intentions to educate Americans on important values. That same year in Concord, Massachusetts, the novel was banned. According to an article in the *New York Herald* reflecting the Concord ban, the novel was considered “trash and suitable only for the slums.” Over one hundred years later, the book is still excluded from libraries and classrooms. As Civil Rights started to emerge in the 1950’s and 60’s, members of the NAACP, along with other African Americans, rallied to take the book off of shelves. Clearly, the idea that Mark Twain was a racist continues to be a problem. Ironically though, people have marked *Huckleberry Finn* as one of the most meaningful masterpieces in American literature. In 1965, *The New York Times* protested the decision to ban the book:

“Of all the characters in Mark Twain’s works, there probably wasn’t any of whom he was fonder than the one that went down the river with Huck Finn.”

How would it feel to be an African American in a classroom that hears the word “nigger” without commentary? If these feelings are painful, should they not be taken into account? Black stereotypes upset African Americans, for they are still fighting today to gain society’s acceptance. Are schools keeping this problem alive by requiring their students to read *Huckleberry Finn*? We may find the language in *Huckleberry Finn* upsetting, but taking a look at the time in which Twain lived, we should need to understand that this was the vernacular of his time. Although Twain is criticized for being profane, he recognized the deepest flaws of the past and depicted the American situation accurately.

The problem with *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is that the novel is outdated. What was common language back in the “old days,” or during Twain’s time, is now offensive to many. While some African Americans say the *Huckleberry Finn* is racist, the contrary is actually true. *Huck Finn* is controversial because of its topic, slavery. Slavery is hard to acknowledge because it is America’s most agonizing and painful memory. Sure, some of Twain’s details may have been a bit inaccurate, but his focus was more on expanding people’s understanding concerning racism, and why it was wrong. I searched through most of Twain’s work, and even in his private letters, there is not a trace of an insulting remark about African Americans. Let’s keep in mind that this was during a time when racial stereotypes were most popular in literature.

The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn will always be notorious for causing controversy in our country. Of course, many people will have mixed perspectives about a book with strong language. It is important, however, for everyone to know that banning a book is a dangerous thing. Censorship in general is a dangerous thing. Banning a book suggests that reading can be dangerous. Is taking away literature a lesson that educators should convey to children? Or should educators keep books like *Huckleberry Finn* on the shelves and find different ways of teaching them?

As my research has shown, African Americans view this novel very differently than whites. The language is considered offensive, and the character of Jim may portray blacks as half-witted. Racial stereotypes need to be dismissed in America. In order for children to accept people of all races, they must be educated on the importance of diversity at a young age. The teaching of *Huckleberry Finn* in classrooms may cause problems for a few reasons. If the children are *too* young, they may not be at the maturity level to communicate their opinions about the novel with their classmates. If a student does not view the novel with a developed notion of what Twain is speaking to them

about, there could be misconceptions about the book. In other words, a solution for keeping the novel in the classroom is to maybe teach it at a high school level, as opposed to an elementary or middle school level.

A student's level of maturity is an important factor in teaching *Huckleberry Finn*. But in addition to *when* the novel is taught, we also need to consider *how* it is taught. By simply skimming through the book, the reader may be exposed to negative character development. However, Twain created the novel with the notion that readers would see the development Jim's character as a positive way to do away with stereotypes. In order to teach the book this way, educators should try a different approach.

One way to investigate Jim's character is to have students flip around their original ideas about Jim and Huck's relationship. Jim, then, would be the character who helps Huck. This way, the students could think about Jim from a different perspective. Students could be asked how a slave, who people have dehumanized and belittled, actually humanizes and frees Huck. Readers may evaluate preconceived assumptions that Huck was free since he was white and living in a white-powered society. How has Jim proven that he has dominated society? By taking a different glimpse at Jim, students will focus less on the concrete details of the novel, and look into what is not implied by Twain. This will get students thinking more about the abstract component of literature, and how Twain used certain approaches to get his point across to his readers.

Throughout my research, I was able to explore reasons for why people did or did not enjoy reading *Huckleberry Finn*. Some African Americans have felt that the novel is racist, so it should therefore be banned. I feel that we live in a democracy where we have a choice to say what we feel. In countries where there is not a democracy, books are banned so the truth can be hidden from people. By keeping literature readily available, people can decide whether they think a book is junk or valuable. In which case, it is good to judge a book because as Americans, we have that right. We need free expression to teach people the truth about themselves and their past.

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