**The Struggle for Tolerance:**

**Race and Censorship in Huckleberry Finn**

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In the long controversy that has been *Huckleberry Finn's* history, the novel has been criticized, censored, and banned for an array of perceived failings, including obscenity, atheism, bad grammar, coarse manners, low moral tone, and antisouthernism. Every bit as diverse as the reasons for attacking the novel, *Huck Finn's* detractors encompass parents, critics, authors, religious fundamentalists, right­wing politicians, and even librarians.(1)

Ironically, Lionel Trifling, by marking *Huck Finn* as "one of the world's great books and one of the central documents of American culture," (2) and T. S. Eliot, by declaring it "a masterpiece," (3) struck the novel certainly its most fateful and possibly its most fatal blow. Trilling's and Eliot's resounding endorsements provided Huck with the academic respectability and clout that assured his admission into America's classrooms. Huck's entrenchment in the English curricula of junior and senior high schools coincided with *Brown vs. Topeka Board of Education,* the Supreme Court case that ended public school segregation, legally if not actually, in 1954. Desegregation and the civil rights movement deposited Huck in the midst of American literature classes which were no longer composed of white children only, but now were dotted with black youngsters as well. In the faces of these children of the revolution, Huck met the group that was to become his most persistent and formidable foe. For while the objectionsof the Gilded Age, of fundamentalist religious factions, and of unreconstructed Southerners had seemed laughable and transitory, the indignation of black students and their parents at the portrayal of blacks in *Huck Finn* was not at all comical and has not been short-lived.

The presence of black students in the classrooms of white America the attendant tensions of a country attempting to come to terms with its racial tragedies, and the new empowerment of blacks to protest led to *Huck Finn's* greatest struggle with censorship and banning. Black protesters, offended by the repetitions of "nigger" in the mouths of white and black characters, Twain's minstrel­like portrayal of the escaped slave Jim and of black characters in general, and the negative traits assigned to blacks, objected to the use of *Huck* *Finn* in English courses. Though blacks may have previously complained about the racially offensive tone of the novel, it was not until September *1957* that the *New York Times* reported the first case that brought about official reaction and obtained public attention for the conflict. The New York City Board of Education had removed *Huck* *Finn* from the approved textbook lists of elementary and junior high schools. The book was no longer available for classroom use at the elementary and junior high school levels, but could be taught in high school and purchased for school libraries. Though the Board of Education acknowledged no outside pressure to ban the use of *Huck Finn*, arepresentative of one publisher said that school officials had cited "some passages derogatory to Negroes" as the reason for its contract not being renewed. The NAACP, denying that it had placed any organized pressure on the board to remove *Huck Finn,* nonetheless expressed displeasure with the presence of "racial slurs" and "belittling racial designations" in many of Twain's works. (4) Whether or not the source of dissatisfaction could be identified, disapproval of *Huck**Finn's* racial implications existed and had made itself felt.

The discontent with the racial attitudes of *Huck* *Finn* that began in *1957* has surfaced periodically over the past thirty years. In *1963* the Philadelphia Board of Education, after removing *Huck* *Finn,* replaced it with an adapted version which "tone[d] down the violence, simplify[d] the Southern dialect, and delete[d] all derogatory referencesto Negroes." (5) A civil rights leader in Pasco, Washington, attacked Twain's use of "nigger" in *1967* (6) two years later Miami­Dade JuniorCollege (Miami, Florida) excised the text from its required reading list after Negro students complained that it "embarrassed them" (7) Around *1976,* striking a bargain with parents of black students who demanded the removal of *Huck* *Finn* from the curriculum, the administrationof New Trier High School in Winnetka, Illinois, agreed to withdraw the novel from required courses and confined Huck to the environs of elective courses and the school library. This compromise did not end Huck's problems in that north­shore Chicago upper middle­class community, however, for as recently as March 1988 black parents "discovered" Huck in American Studies, an elective course team taught by an English teacher and an American history teacher, and once again approached school administrators about banning the book. (8)

The most outspoken opponent to *Huck Finn* has been John Wallace, a former administrator at the Mark Twain Intermediate School (Fairfax County, Virginia), who in 1982, while serving on the school's Human Relations Committee, spearheaded a campaign to have Huck stricken from school curricula. A decision by the school's principal to yield to the Human Relations Committee's recommendations was later overridden by the superintendent of schools. Repeatedly scoring the book as "racist trash," Wallace has raised the issue in other school districts throughout his twenty­eight­year tenure in public education. Since the Fairfax County incident, he has appeared on ABC's "Nightline" and CNN's "Freeman Reports" and has traveled the country championing the cause of black children who he says are embarrassed and humiliated by the legitimization of "nigger" in public schools. Devoted to the eradication of *Huck Finn* from the schools, he has "authored" an adapted version of Twain's story. (9) Wallace, aggressively if not eloquently, enunciates many of the deleterious effects that parents and those who support them feel the teaching of *Huck Finn* in junior high and senior high schools has on their children. (10)

The fact that people from Texas to Iowa to Illinois to Pennsylvania to Florida to Virginia to New York City concur with Wallace's assessment of *Huck Finn* demands the attention of the academic community. To condemn concerns about the novel as the misguided rantings of "know nothings and noise makers" (11) is no longer valid or profitable; nor can the invocation of Huck's immunity under the protectorate of "classic" suffice. Such academic platitudes no longer intimidate, nor can they satisfy, parents who have walked the halls of the university and have shed their awe of academe. If the academic establishment remains unmoved by black readers' dismay, the news that *Huck* *Finn* ranks ninth on the list of thirty books most frequently challenged (12) should serve as testimony that the book's "racial problem" is one of more consequence than the ancillary position to which scholars have relegated it. (13) Certainly, given *Huck Finn's* high position in the canon of American literature, its failure to take on mythic proportions for, or even to be a pleasant read for, a segment of secondary school students merits academic scrutiny.

The debate surrounding the racial implications of *Huck Finn* and its appropriateness for the secondary school classroom gives rise to myriad considerations. The actual matter and intent of the text are a source of contention. The presence of the word "nigger," the treatment of Jim and blacks in general, the somewhat difficult satiric mode, and the ambiguity of theme give pause to even the most flexible reader. Moreover, as numerous critics have pointed out, neither junior high nor high school students are necessarily flexible or subtle readers. The very profundity of the text renders the process of teaching it problematic and places special emphasis on teacher ability and attitude. Student cognitive and social maturity also takes on special significance in the face of such a complicated and subtle text.

The nature of the complexities of *Huck* *Finn* places the dynamics of the struggle for its inclusion in or exclusion from public school curricula in two arenas. On the one hand, the conflict manifests itself as a contest between lay readers and so­called scholarly experts, particularly as it concerns the text. Public school administrators and teachers, on the other hand, field criticisms that have to do with the context into which the novel is introduced. In neither case, however, do the opponents appear to *hear* each other. Too often, concerned parents are dismissed by academia as "neurotics" (14) who have fallen prey to personal racial insecurities or have failed to grasp Twain's underlying truth. In their turn, censors regard academics as inhabitants of ivory towers who pontificate on the virtue of *Huck Finn* without recognizing its potential for harm. School officials and parents clash over the school's right to intellectual freedom and the parents' right to protect their children from perceived racism.

Critics vilify Twain most often and most vehemently for his aggressive use of the pejorative term "nigger." Detractors, refusing to accept the good intentions of a text that places the insulting epithet so often in the mouths of characters, black and white, argue that no amount of intended irony or satire can erase the humiliation experienced by black children. Reading *Huck Finn* aloud adds deliberate insult to insensitive injury, complain some. In a letter to the *New* York Times, Allan B. Ballard recalls his reaction to having Huck *Finn* read aloud "in a predominantly white junior high school in Philadelphia some 30 years ago."

Ican still recall the anger I felt as my white classmates read aloud the word "nigger." In fact, as I write this letter I am getting angry all over again. I wanted to sink into my seat. Some of the whites snickered, others giggled. Ican recall nothing of the literary merits of this work that you term "the greatest of all American novels." I only recall the sense of relief I felt when Iwould flip ahead a few pages and see that the word "nigger" would not be read that hour. (15)

Moreover, the presentation of the novel as an "American classic" serves as an official endorsement of a term uttered by the most prejudiced racial bigots to an age group eager to experiment with any language of shock value. One reporter has likened the teaching of the novel to eighth­grade kids to "pulling the pin of a hand grenade and tossing it into the all too common American classroom." (16)

Some who have followed *Huck Finn's* racial problems express dismay that some blacks misunderstand the ironic function Twain assigned "nigger" or that other blacks, inspite of their comprehension of the irony, will allow themselves and their progeny to be defeated by a mere pejorative. Leslie Fiedler would have parents "prize Twain's dangerous and equivocal novel not in spite of its use of that wicked epithet, but for the way in which it manages to ironize it; enabling us finally­without denying our horror or our guilt­to laugh therapeutically at the 'peculiar institution' of slavery." (17) If Wallace has taken it upon himself to speak for the opponents of *Huck Finn,* Nat Hentoff, libertarian journalist for the Village Voice, has taken equal duty as spokesperson for the novel's champions. Hentoff believes that confronting, Huck will give students "the capacity to see past words like 'nigger' . . into what the writer is actually *saying*." He wonders, "What's going to happen to a kid when he gets into the world if he's going to let a word paralyze him so he can't think?" (18) Citing an incident in Warrington, Pennsylvania, where a black eighth grader was allegedly verbally and physically harassed by white students after reading *Huck Finn* inclass, Hentoff declares the situation ripe for the educational plucking by any "reasonably awake teacher." He enthuses:

What a way to get Huck and Jim, on the one hand, and all those white racists they meet., on the other hand, off the pages of the book and into that very classroom. Talk about a book coming alive!

Look at that *Huck Finn*. Reared in racism, like all the white kids in his town. And then, on the river, on the raft with Jim, shucking off that blind ignorance because this runaway slave is the most honest, perceptive, fair­minded man this white boy has ever known. What a book for the children, all the children, in Warrington, Pennsylvania, in 1982! (19)

Hentoff laments the fact that teachers missed such a teachable moment and mockingly reports the compromise agreed upon­by parents and school officials, declaring it a "victory for niceness." Justin Kaplan flatly denies that "anyone, of any color, who had actually read *Huckleberry Finn,* instead of merely reading or hearing about it, and who had allowed himself or herself even the barest minimum of intelligent response to its underlying spirit and intention, could accuse it of being 'racist' because some of its characters use offensive racial epithets. (20) Hentoff's mocking tone and reductive language Kaplan's disdainful and condescending attitude, and Fiedler's erroneous supposition that "nigger" can be objectified so as to allow a black person "to laugh therapeutically" at slavery illustrate the incapacity of non-blacks to comprehend the enormous emotional freight attached to the hateword "nigger" for each black person. Nigger is "fightin" words and everyone in this country, black and white, knows it." (21) In his autobiography, Langston Hughes offers a cogent explanation of the signification of "nigger" to blacks:

The word *nigger* to colored people of high and low degree is like a red rag to a bull. Used rightly or wrongly, ironically or seriously, of necessity for the sake of realism, or impishly for the sake of comedy, it doesn't matter. 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. Even though the book or play is written by a Negro, they still do not like it.

The word *nigger,* yousee, sums up for us who are colored all the bitter years of insult and struggle in America. (22)

Nonblacks know implicitly that to utter "nigger" in the presence of a Negro is to throw down a gauntlet that will be taken up with a vengeance.

To dismiss the word's recurrence in the work as an accurate rendition of nineteenth­century American linguistic conventions denies what every black person knows: far more than a synonym for slave, "nigger" signifies a concept. It conjures centuries of specifically black degradation and humiliation during which the family was disintegrated, education was denied, manhood was trapped within a forced perpetual puerilism, and womanhood was destroyed by concubinage**.** If one grants that Twain substituted "nigger" for "slave," the implications of the word do not improve; "nigger" denotes the black man as a commodity, as chattel. (23)

In addition to serving as a reminder of the "peculiar institution" "nigger" encapsulates the decades of oppression that followed emancipation. "It means not only racist terror and lynch mobs but that victims 'deserve it.'" (24) Outside Central High in Little Rock in 1954 it was emblazoned across placards; and across the South throughout the 1950s and into the 1960s it was screamed by angry mobs. Currently, it is the chief taunt of the Ku Klux Klan and other white supremacist groups. In short, "nigger" has the odious distinction of signifying all "the shame, the frustration, the rage, the fear" that has been so much a part of the history of race relations in the United States, and blacks still consider it "'dirtier" than any of the once­taboo four­syllable Anglo­Saxon monosyllabics." (25) So to impute blacks' abhorrence of "nigger" to hypersensitivity compounds injustice with callousness and signals a refusal to acknowledge that the connotations of "that word" generate a cultural discomfort that blacks share with no other racial group.

To counteract the Pavlovian response that "nigger" triggers for many black readers, some scholars have striven to reveal the positive function the word serves in the novel by exposing the discrepancy between the dehumanizing effect of the word and the real humanity Of Jim. (26) Fiedler cites the passage in which Huck lies to Aunt Sally about a steamboat explosion that hurt no one but "killed a nigger," and Aunt Sally callously responds, "Well, it's lucky, because sometimes people do get hurt" (chap. 32); he notes that the passage brims with humor at the expense of Aunt Sally and the convention to which she conforms. But Fiedler is also of the opinion that Huck does not get the joke­does not recognize the humor of the fact that he and Aunt Sally by "dehumanizing the Negro diminish their own humanity. (27) It seems to Huck's foes (and to me) that if Huck does not get the joke, then there is no joke, and he becomes as culpable as Aunt Sally.

However, Fiedler's focus on this dialogue is to the point, because racial objectors isolate it as one of the most visible and detrimental slurs of the novel. The highlighting of this passage summons contrasting perspectives on it. Kaplan argues that "one has to be deliberately dense to miss the point Mark Twain is making here and to construe such passages as evidences of his 'racism." (28) Detractors drawing the obvious inference from the dialogue, arrive at a conclusion different from Kaplan's, and their response cannot simply be disregarded as that of the unsophisticated reader. In order to believe in Twain's satirical intention, one has to believe in Huck's good faith toward Jim. That is to say, one has to believe that, rather than reflecting his own adherence to such conventions, Huck simply weaves a tale that marks him as a "right­thinking" youngster.

The faith in Huck that Twain's defenders display grows out of the manner in which he acquits himself at his celebrated "crisis of conscience," less than twenty­four hours prior to his encounter with Aunt Sally. There is no denying the rightness of Huck's decision to risk his soul for Jim. But there is no tangible reason to assume that the regard Huck acquires for Jim during his odyssey down the river is generalized to encompass all blacks. Further, Huck's choice to "go to hell" has little to do with any respect he has gained for Jim as a human being with an inalienable right to be owned by no one. Rather, his personal affection for the slave governs his overthrow of societal mores. It must be remembered that Huck does not adjudge slavery to be wrong; he selectively disregards a system that he ultimately believes is right. So when he discourses with Aunt Sally, he is expressing views he still holds. His emancipatory attitudes extend no further than his love for Jim. It seems valid to argue that were he given the option of freeing other slaves, Huck would not necessarily choose manumission.

Twain's apparent "perpetuation of racial stereotypes" through his portrayal of Jim and other blacks in *Huck Finn* bears relation to his use of "nigger" and has fostered vociferous criticism from anti­*Huck Finn* forces. Like the concept "nigger," Twain's depiction of blacks, particularly Jim, represents the tendency of the dominant white culture to saddle blacks with traits that deny their humanity and mark them as inferior. Critics disparage scenes that depict blacks as childish, inherently less intelligent than whites, superstitious beyond reason and common sense, and grossly ignorant of standard English. Further, they charge that in order to entertain his white audience, Twain relied upon the stock conventions of "black minstrelsy," which "drew upon European traditions of using the mask of blackness to mock individuals or social forces." (29) Given the seemingly negative stereotypical portraits of blacks, parents concerned that children, black and white, be exposed to positive models of blacks are convinced that *Huck Finn* isinappropriate for secondary classrooms.

Critics express their greatest displeasure with Twain's presentation of Jim, the runaway slave viewed by most as second only to Huck in importance to the novel's thematic structure. Although he is the catalyst that spurs Huck along his odyssey of conscience, Jim commences the novel (and to some degree remains) as the stereotypical, superstitious "darky" that Twain's white audience would have expected and in which they would have delighted.

In his essay "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke," Ralph Ellison examines the play Twain gives the minstrel figure. Though Twain does strike Jim in the mold of the minstrel tradition, Ellison believes that we observe "Jim's dignity and human capacity" emerge from "behind this stereotype mask." Yet by virtue of his minstrel mask, Jim's role as an adult is undercut, and he often appears more childlike than Huck. Though Ellison writes that "it is not at all odd that this black­faced figure of white fan [the minstrel darky] is for Negroes a symbol of everything they rejected in the white man's thinking about race, in themselves and in their own group," his final analysis seems to be that Jim's humanity transcends the limits of the minstrel tradition. (30)

Taking a more critical stance than Ellison, Frederick Woodard and Donnarae MacCann, in *"Huckleberry Finn* and the Traditions of Blackface Minstrelsy," examine specific incidents throughout the novel in the light of the minstrel tradition. Denying that Jim is used to poke fun at whites, as some scholars suggest, Woodard and MacCann cite the appeal that the "ridiculous or paternalistic portrayals of Black Americans" held for "the white theatre­going audience," Twain's own delight in minstrel shows, and his "willingness to shape his message to his audience." (31) Noting that the stereotypical blackface portrayals were thought to be realistic by Twain and many of his white contemporaries, the pair highlight various incidents in *Huck Finn* that they think illustrate their contention that Jim plays the minstrel role to Huck's straight man. For instance, Huck's and Jim's debate about French (chap. 14) bears a striking resemblance to the minstrel­show dialogue that Twain deemed "happy and accurate imitation[s] of the *usual* *and familiar negro* quarrel." (32) Though Jim's logic is superior to Huck's, argue Woodard and MacCann, the scene plays like a minstrel­show act because "Jim has the information­base of a child." (33)

*Huck Finn* advocates, tending to agree with Ellison's judgment that Jim's fullness of character reveals itself, offer readings of Jim that depart sharply from the Woodard and MacCann assessment. Some view Twain's depiction of Jim early in the novel as the necessary backdrop against which Huck's gradual awareness of Jim's humanity is revealed. These early renditions of Jim serve more to lay bare Huck's initial attitudes toward race and racial relations than they do to characterize Jim, positively or negatively. As the two fugitives ride down the Mississippi deeper and deeper into slave territory, the power of Jim's personality erodes the prejudices Huck's culture (educational, political, social, and legal) has instilled. Such readings of passages that appear to emphasize Jim's superstitions, gullibility, or foolishness allow Twain to escape the charge of racism and be seen as championing blacks by exposing the falseness of stereotypes. This view of Twain's motivation is evident in letters written to the *New York Times* in protest of the New York City Board of Education's decision to ban the book in 1957:

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. It is true that this character is introduced as "Miss Watson's big nigger, named Jim." That was the Missouri vernacular of the day. But from there on to the end of the story Miss Watson's Jim is a warm human being, lovable and admirable. (34)

Now, *Huckleberry Finn*... is a great document in the progress of human tolerance and understanding. Huck begins by regarding Jim, the fugitive slave, very much as the juvenile delinquents of Little Rock regard the Negro today. Gradually, however, he discovers that Jim, despite the efforts of society to brutalize him, is a noble human being who deserves his protection, friendship, and respect. This theme of growing love is made clear throughout the book. (35)

In another vein, some defenders of Twain's racial sensitivities assign Jim's initial portrayal a more significant role than mere backdrop. The rubric of "performed ideology" frames Steven Mailloux's interpretation of Jim as he appears in the early "philosophical debates" with Huck. (36) Mailloux explains how a "literary text can take up the ideological rhetoric of its historical moment... and place it on a fictional stage." As "ideological drama," the literary text­*Huckleberry Finn* in this case­invites readers to become spectators and actors at a rhetorical performance. In fact, the success of the ideological drama depends upon the reader's participation: "The humor and often the ideological point of the novel's many staged arguments... rely upon the reader's ability to recognize patterns of false argumentation." Within the framework of rhetorical performances, then, Jim's minstrel scenes serve "as ideological critique[s] of white supremacy." In each case, however, the dominance of Jim's humanity over the racial discourse of white supremacy hinges upon the reader's recognition of the discrepancy between the two ideologies. (37)

The interpretive job that Mailloux does on the "French question" in chapter 14 exonerates the passage of any racial negativity. Huck's disdainful comment that "you can't learn a nigger to argue" renders the debate little more than a literary version of a minstrel dialogue unless readers recognize the superior rhetorician: "Of course, readers reject the racist slur as a rationalization. They know Huck gives up because he has lost the argument: it is precisely because Jim *has* learned to argue by imitating Huck that he reduces his teacher to silence. Far from demonstrating Jim's inferior knowledge, the debate dramatizes his argumentative superiority, and in doing so makes a serious ideological point through a rhetoric of humor." (38) The vigorous critical acumen with which Mailloux approaches the role played by Jim is illustrative of the interpretative tacks taken by academics. Most view Twain's depiction of Jim as an ironic attempt to transcend the very prejudices that dissidents accuse him of perpetuating.

Though there has been copious criticism of the Jim who shuffles his way across the pages of *Huckleberry Finn's* opening chapters, the Jim who darkens the closing chapters of the novel elicits even more (and more universally agreed­upon) disapprobation. Most see the closing sequence, which begins at Huck's encounter with Aunt Sally, as a reversal of any moral intention that the preceding chapters imply. The significance that Twain's audience has attached to the journey down the river­Jim's pursuit of freedom and Huck's gradual recognition of the slave's humanness­is rendered meaningless by the entrance of Tom Sawyer and his machinations to "free" Jim.

The particular offensiveness to blacks of the closing sequence of *Huckleberry Finn* results in part from expectations that Twain has built up during the raft ride down the river. As the two runaways drift down the Mississippi, Huck (along with the reader) watches Jim emerge as a man whose sense of dignity and self­respect dwarf the minstrel mask. No one can deny the manly indignation evinced by Jim when Huck attempts to convince him that he has only dreamed their separation during the night of the heavy fog. Huck himself is so struck by Jim's passion that he humbles himself "to a nigger" and "warn't ever sorry for it afterwards" (chap. 15).

From this point, the multidimensionality of Jim's personality erodes Huck's socialized attitudes about blacks. During the night, thinking that Huck is asleep, Jim vents the adult frustrations he does not expect Huck to understand or alleviate; he laments having to abandon his wife and two children: "Po' little Lizbeth! Po' little Johnny! It's might hard; I spec' I ain't ever gwyne to see you no mo', no mo"' (chap. 2.3). Berating himself for having struck his four­year old daughter, Elizabeth, in punishment for what he thought was blatant disobedience, Jim tells Huck of his remorse after discovering that the toddler had gone deaf without his knowledge. Through such poignant moments Huck learns, to his surprise, that Jim "cared just as much for his people as white folks does for their'n. It don't seem natural, but I reckon it's so" (chap. 23).

Finally, in the welcome absence of Pap, Jim becomes a surrogate father to Huck, allowing the boy to sleep when he should stand watch on the raft, giving him the affection his natural father did not, and making sure that the raft is stocked and hidden. Thus Twain allows Jim to blossom into a mature, complex human being whom Huck admires and respects. The fullness of character with which Twain imbues Jim compels Huck to "decide, forever, betwixt two things." The reader applauds Hucks' acceptance of damnation for helping Jim and affixes all expectations for the rest of the novel to this climactic moment.

Having thus tantalized readers with the prospect of harmonious relations between white and black, Twain seems to turn on his characters and his audience. Leo Marx, who mounted the best­known attack on the novel's ending in his essay "Mr. Eliot, Mr. Trilling, and *Huckleberry Finn,"* describes it as a glaring lapse "of moral vision" resulting from Twain's inability to "acknowledge the truth his novel contained." (39) Readers' discomfort with the "evasion" sequence results from discrepancies between the Jim and Huck who grow in stature on the raft and the impostors who submit to Tom. Fritz Oehschlaeger's "'Gwyne to Git Hung': The Conclusion of *Huckleberry Finn"* expresses the frustrations that many experience regarding the evasion:

The... shift in tone from one of high seriousness to one of low burlesque is so abrupt as to be almost chilling. Clemens has simply made the issues too serious for us to accept a return to the boyhood world of the novel's opening. We are asked to forget Huck's process of moral education, his growing awareness of Jim's value as a human being.

Similarly, we are asked to forget Jim's nobility, revealed to us repeatedly in the escape down the river. Instead, Jim becomes again the stereotyped, minstrel­show "nigger" of the novel's first section, a figure to be manipulated, tricked, and ridiculed by the boys. Perhaps even less acceptable is Clemens's apparent decision to allow Miss Watson a partial redemption through her death­bed freeing of Jim. At the end Jim is free and considers himself rich, and Huck is left to pursue further adventures in the Territory. [Yet] ... something in us longs for quite a different outcome, one that would allow Jim to retain his heroic stature and force Huck to live up to the decision that accompanies his tearing up of the letter to Miss Watson. (40)

By this view, Twain's apparent abandonment of Huck's reformation and Jim's quest for freedom constitutes an absolute betrayal, Consequently, any redemptive racial attitudes that Twain has displayed earlier are nullified; his final portrait of Jim appears sinister and malicious.

Scholars have attempted to read the evasion sequence in ways that would make it palatable by placing it in sync with the preceding chapters. In just such an attempt to render the last ten chapters less irksome, James M. Cox attacks the very thing that has led readers to deplore that last one­fourth­that is, the moral sentiment against which we measure Tom's actions. Our moral sentiment, explains Cox, (41) leads us to misconstrue Twain's intent and to declare the ending a failure. Twain does not, as most believe, lose courage and fail to carry through with his indictment of the racial attitudes of the Old South. On the contrary, the closing sequence returns the novel and Huck to Twain's true central meaning.

For thirty­one chapters Twain wages an attack upon conscience not upon the southern conscience, as we want to believe, but upon any conscience. According to Cox, "the deep wish which *Huckleberry Finn* embodies" is "the wish for freedom from any conscience." Huck flees conscience at every turn, making choices based on what is most comfortable. It is this adherence to the pleasure principle that defines Huck's identity and governs his actions toward Jim, not a racial enlightenment, as we would hope. The moment at which Huck forsakes the pleasure principle and of which we most approve marks the pointat which his identity and Twain's central focus, according to Cox, are in the most jeopardy: "In the very act of choosing to go to hell he hassurrendered to the notion of a principle of right and wrong. He has forsaken the world of pleasure to make a moral choice. Precisely here is where Huck is about to negate himself­where, with an act of positive virtue, he actually commits himself to play the role of Tom Sawyer which he has to assume in the closing section of the book." (42) Insofar as the concluding sections bring Huck back into line with Twain's determination to subvert conscience, it remains consistent with the preceding chapters. Given this, to declare Twain's ending a failure is to deny his actual thematic intent and to increase our discomfort with the concluding segments.

Cox's argument demonstrates the ingenious lengths to which scholars go to feel comfortable with the final chapters of *Huck Finn.* But the inadequacy of such academic ingenuities in meeting this and other challenges to the novel becomes clear when one considers that the issue remains "hot" enough to make it available for debate on prime­time television. (43) What scholars must realize is that no amount ofinterpretive acrobatics can mediate the actual matter ofthe closing sequence. Regardless ofTwain's motivation or intent, Jim does deflate and climb back into the minstrel costume. His self­respect and manly pursuit of freedom bow subserviently before the childish pranks ofan adolescent white boy.

Considering the perplexity ofthe evasion brings us back full circle to *Huckleberry Finn's* suitability for public schools. Given the powerlessness ofhighly discerning readers to resolve the novel in a way that unambiguously redeems Jim or Huck, how can students be expected to fare better with the novel's conclusion? Parents question the advisability o*f* teaching to junior and senior high school students a text which requires such sophisticated interpretation in order for its moral statements to come clear. The teaching of such a text presumes a level of intellectual maturity not yet realized by secondary school students, particularly eighth­ and ninth­grade students who are in the inchoate stages ofliterary studies. Parents fear that the more obvious negative aspects ofJim's depiction may overshadow the more subtle uses to which they are put. Critics such as Mailloux point to the reader as the component necessary to obviate the racism inherent in, for example, the interchange between Aunt Sally and Huck. (44) But ifan eighth­ or ninth­grader proves incapable ofcompleting the process begun by Twain, then the ideological point is lost. This likely possibility causes parents to be hesitant about approving *Huck Finn* for the classroom.

*Huck Finn* apologists view the objection to the novel on the ground of students' cognitive immaturity as an underestimation of youngsters' abilities. In the third of his four­part series on the censorship of *Huck Finn*, (45)Hentoff boasts that the ability of children in 1982 to fathom Twain's subtleties is at least comparable to that of children who read the novel a century ago. "At 10, or 12, or 14, even with only the beginning ring of meaning," writes Hentoff, "any child who can read will not miss the doltishness and sheer meanness and great foolishness of most whites in the book, particularly in their attitudes toward blacks." (46) He continues, "Nor will the child miss the courage and invincible decency of the white boy and the black man on the river." While Hentoff's confidence in the American schoolchild is commendable, his enthusiasm reveals a naiveté about junior high school students' critical insight. As Cox's and Mailloux's articles show, the points of the novel are anything but "as big as barn doors." Therefore, the cognitive maturity of students and the grade­level placement of the novel are of grave importance.

That *Huckleberry Finn* brims with satire and irony is a truism of academic discourse. But a study conducted in 1983 to examine "the effects of reading *Huckleberry Finn* on the racial attitudes of ninth grade students" corroborates the contention that junior high school students lack the critical perception to successfully negotiate the satire present in the novel. According to the committee that directed the study, the collected data indicated "that the elements of satire which are crucial to an understanding of the novel go largely unobserved by students." (47) That approximately one­third of the group (those students who studied the novel as an instructional unit) regarded *Huckleberry Finn* as merely an adventure story "after several weeks of serious study" left the committee convinced "that many students are not yet ready to understand the novel on its more complex levels." Therefore, although not advising expulsion of the novel, the panel recommended its removal from the ninth­grade curriculum and placement in the eleventh­ or twelfth­grade syllabus:

This recommendation is made, not because the use of *Huckleberry Finn* promotes or furthers negative stereotyping­the preponderance of our data suggests that, if anything, it lessens such stereotyping­but because some of the literary objectives given as justification for the use of the book seem not to have been achieved. Given the degree and instances of irony and satire in the book, the difficult dialects and general reading level of the book, and the tendency of many students to read the book at the level of an adventure story, the committee believes, the novel requires more literary sophistication than can reasonably be expected from an average ninth grade student. (48)

Though the Penn State study does not support parents' calls for total removal *of Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* from the curriculum, it does validate their reservations about the presence *of* the work at the junior high level. Possibly a sufficiently mature audience is present in the eleventh­ and twelfth­grade classes of America, but it seems not to be available in the eighth, ninth, or even tenth grades.

The volatile combination of satire, irony, and questions of race underscores an additional important facet ofthe controversy: teacher ability and attitude. The position ofthe classroom teacher in the conflict over *Huckleberry Finn* is delicate: students not only look to teachers as intellectual mentors, but turn to them for emotional and social guidance as well. So in addition to ensuring that students traverse the scholarly territory that the curriculum requires, teachers must guarantee that students complete the journey with their emotional beings intact.

The tenuous status of race relations in the United States complicates the undertaking ofsuch an instructional unit. Cox, despite his affection for the novel and his libertarian views, admits that were he "teaching an American literature course in Bedford Stuyvesant or Watts or North Philadelphia," he might choose Twain texts other than *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn.* (49)A situation as emotionally charged as the introduction ofthe word "nigger" into class discussion requires a sensitivity and perspicacity that parents are unconvinced a majority ofteachers possess. Those who want the "classic" expelled dread the occurrence ofincidents such as the one described by Hentoff on ABC'S "Nightline." (50) According to Hentoff, a teacher in Texas commenced her initial class discussion ofthe novel with the question "What is a nigger?" In response, the white students in the class looked around the room at the black kids. In addition to this type ofineptness, the lack ofcommitment to human equality on the part *of some* teachers looms large in the minds *of* would­be censors. The "inherent threat" of *Huckleberry Finn* isthat in the hands ofan unfit, uncommitted teacher it can become a tool of oppression and harmful indoctrination.

Assuming the inverse to be equally possible, a competent, racially accepting educator could transform the potential threat into a challenge. *Huckleberry Finn* presents the secondary teacher with a vehicle to effect powerful, positive interracial exchange among students. Though I have not taught *Huckleberry Finn* in a secondary school, I have taught Harper Lee's *To Kill* *a Mockingbird,* which is "tainted" with the pejorative "nigger" as well as "nigger­lover," and which is also under fire from censors. Like *Huck Finn, To Kill a Mockingbird* treats a highly emotional racial episode. Different from Twain's novel, however, is the clear­cut use of "nigger­lover" and "nigger" by characters who intend the terms to be derogatory (except where Atticus Finch, a liberal lawyer, forbids his children to use them­an important exception). Set in a small, bigoted Alabama town during the Great Depression, the Pulitzer Prize­winning novel is narrated by Atticus's daughter, Scout, a precocious tomboy. Scout, along with her older brother Jem and playmate Dill, observes the horrors of racial prejudice as they are played out in the trial of a black man, Tom Robinson, wrongfully accused of rape by a white woman.

Over a four­year period in Austin, Texas, I introduced the novel to approximately five hundred public school ninth­graders. Each time I taught the four­week 'unit on To Kill *a Mockingbird,* the most difficult day of instruction involved the introduction of "nigger" (actually "nigger­lover") into class discussion. My rationale for forcing the word into active class discourse proceeded from my belief that students (black and white) could only face sensitive issues of race after they had achieved a certain emotional distance from the rhetoric of race. I thought (and became convinced over the years) that open confrontation in the controlled setting of the classroom could achieve that emotional distance.

Early in the novel, when another child calls Atticus, who has agreed to defend Robinson, a "nigger­lover," Scout picks a fight with him. When Atticus learns of the fray, Scout asks if he is a "nigger lover." Beautifully undercutting the malice of the phrase, Atticus responds, "Of course, I am. I try to love everybody." A discussion of this episode would constitute my first endeavor to ease my students into open dialogue about "the word" and its derivatives.

My opening query to each class­Why does Scout get into a fight at school?­was invariably answered with a paroxysm of silence. As the reality of racial discomfort and mistrust cast its shadow over the classroom, the tension would become almost palpable. Unable to utter thetaboo word "nigger," students would be paralyzed, the whites by their social awareness of the moral injunction against it and the blacks by their heightened sensitivity to it. Slowly, torturously, the wallof silence would begin to crumble before students' timid attempts to approach the topic with euphemism. Finally, after some tense moments, one courageous adolescent would utter the word. As the class released an almost audible sigh of relief, the students and I would embark upon a lively and risk­taking exchange about race and its attendant complexities. The interracial understanding fostered by this careful, enlightened study of *To Kill a Mockingbird* can, I think, be achieved with a similar approach to *Huckleberry Finn.*

It must be understood, on the other hand, that the presence of incompetent, insensitive, or (sometimes unwittingly, sometimes purposefully) bigoted instructors in the public schools is no illusion. Black parents who entrust their children's well­being to such people run the risk of having their offspring traumatized and humiliated; white parents risk having their children inculcated with attitudes that run contrary to a belief in human rights and equality. The possibility of lowering black students' self­esteem and undermining their pride in their heritage is a substantial argument against sanctioning the novel's use, and the likelihood that *Huckleberry Finn* could encourage racial prejudice on the part of white students is a matter of comparable concern.

Though these qualms are legitimate and are partly supported by the Penn State study, other studies charged with the task of determining whether *Huckleberry Finn* causes, furthers, or ameliorates poor self­concept, racial shame, or negative racial stereotyping indicate that the novel's influence on a majority of students is positive. A 1972 study that measured the influence the novel had on the racial attitudes of black and white ninth­grade boys yielded only positive results. (51) Herbert Frankel, director of the study, concluded that significant changes in perceptions of blacks occurred for black *and* white students, and all shifts were of a positive nature. The data indicated that black adolescents' self­concepts were enhanced. Further, "black students tended to identify more strongly and more positively with other members of their race" as a result of having studied *Huckleberry Finn.* For white students, reading the novel *"reduce[d]* hostile or unfavorable feelings toward members of another race and *increase[d]* favorable feelings toward members of another race" (emphasis added). Students who read the novel under a teacher's guidance showed "Significantly greater positive change" than those students who read the novel on their own. (52) The Penn State study upholds this lastconclusion, judging the novel "suitable for serious literary study by high school students":

Our data indicate that students who read the novel as part of an instructional unit demonstrated both a deeper sensitivity to the moral and psychological issues central to the novel (a number of which deal with issues of race) and a more positive attitude on matters calling for racial understanding and acceptance. These students were also able to interpret the novel with greater literary sophistication than those students who read the novel without instruction. Additionally, these students were significantly more accepting of contacts with Blacks than were the other students involved in the study. (53)

Based on these studies completed eleven years apart (I972 and 1983), it appears that in the right circumstances *Huckleberry Finn* can be taught without perpetuating negative racial attitudes in white students or undermining racial pride in black students.

Still, in the final analysis the concerns voiced by parents and other would­be censors of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* are not wholly invalid. One has only to run a mental scan across the nation's news headlines to glean a portrait of the present state of American race relations. Such a glimpse betrays the ambivalence present in the status of blacks and their relations with whites. In "Breaking the Silence," a powerful statement on the plight of the "black underclass," Pete Hamill delineates the duality of the American black experience. Admitting the dismal reality of continued racist behavior, Hamill cites "the antibusing violence in liberal Boston, the Bernhard Goetz and Howard Beach cases in liberal New York, [and] a some places." (54) Then, turning to inroads forged toward equality, he mentions that "for the first time in American history, there is a substantial and expanding black middle class, [a] leading contender for the Democratic nomination for President is a black man," and mayors of eight American cities are black. Hamill's article pointsto a fundamental fissure in the American psyche when it comes to race. Further, these details suggest that the teaching of Twain's novel maynot be the innocent pedagogical endeavor that we wish it to be.

Whenwe move from the context into which we want to deposit *Huckleberry Finn* and consider the nature of the text and its creator, matterbecomes even more entangled. Though devotees love to praise *Huckleberry Finn as* "a savage indictment of a society that accepted slavery as a way of life" (55) or "the deadliest satire *...* ever written on *...* the inequality of [the] races," (56) the truth is that neither novel nor itsauthor has escaped ambivalence about racial matters.

First, the ambiguities of the novel are multiple. The characterization of Jim is a string of inconsistencies. At one point he is the superstitious darky; at another he is the indulgent surrogate father. On the one hand, his desire for freedom is unconquerable; on the other, he submits it to the ridiculous antics of a child. Further, while Jim flees from slavery and plots to steal his family out of bondage, most other slaves in the novel embody the romantic contentment with the "peculiar institution" that slaveholders tried to convince abolitionists all slaves felt.

Twain's equivocal attitude toward blacks extends beyond his fiction into his lifelong struggle with "the Negro question." In his autobiography Twain describes the complaisance with which he accepted slavery while growin g up. Leaving slaveholding Missouri seems to have had little effect on his racial outlook, because in 1853 he wrote home to his mother from New York, "I reckon I had better black my face, for in these Eastern states niggers are considerablybetter than white people." He served briefly as a Confederate soldier before heading west and never seemed to be morally discomfited by his defense of slavery. (57) Set over and against these unflattering details are Twain's advocacies for equality. In 1985 a letter proving that Twain had provided financial assistance to a black student at the Yale University Law School in 1885 was discovered and authenticated by Shelley Fisher Fishkin. In the letter Twain writes, 'We [whites] have ground the manhood out of them, & the shame is ours, not theirs, & we should pay for it." (58) He is also known to have teamed with Booker T. Washington in championing several black causes. (59)

The factor of racial uncertainty on the part of Twain, its manifestation in his best­loved piece, and its existence in American society should not be a barrier to *Huckleberry Finn's* admittance to the classroom. Instead, this should make it the pith of the American literature curriculum. The insolubility of the race question as regards *Huckleberry Finn* functions as a model of the fundamental racial ambiguity of the American mind­set. Active engagement with Twain's novel provides one method for students to confront their own deepest racial feelings and insecurities. Though the problems of racial perspective present in *Huckleberry Finn* may never be satisfactorily explained for censors or scholars, the consideration of them may have a practical, positive bearing on the manner in which America approaches race in the coming century.