Title: Adventures of Huckleberry Finn

Alternate Title: Huckleberry Finn

Source: Censorship (Ready Reference series); April 1997, p1-1

Article Author: Includes bibliography

Document Type: Work Analysis

Biographical Information: Twain, Mark

Given Name: Samuel Langhorne Clemens

Gender: Male

National Identity: United States

Language: English

Publication Information: Salem Press

Locale: Mississippi River; United States; North America; Missouri

Abstract: Because of its heavy use of racially sensitive terms and descriptions, this novel has been regularly among the most criticized and censored books considered for high school curricula.

 Literary Genres/Subgenres: Adventure; Long fiction; Novel; Satire

Subject Terms: Adolescence

Boys

Fraud

Impostors or imposture

Midwest

Nineteenth century

Rivers or waterways

Runaway children

Slavery or slaves

Small-town life

South or Southerners

ISBN: 0-89356-444-3

Accession Number: 103331RRC11970200000322

Database: Literary Reference Center

Adventures of Huckleberry Finn

Mark Twain

Given Name: Samuel Langhorne Clemens

Born: November 30, 1835; Florida, Missouri

Died: April 21, 1910; Redding, Connecticut

Quick Reference

First published: 1884 (1885; United States); revised new edition, 2001
Type of work: Novel

Subject matter: Through a series of comic and tragic misadventures, a white youth comes to terms with complex questions of morality, society, and humanity while drifting down the Mississippi River with a runaway slave

Significance: Because of its heavy use of racially sensitive terms and descriptions, this novel has been regularly among the most criticized and censored books considered for high school curricula

The Work
The story of a poor and uneducated boy from eastern Missouri, Adventures of Huckleberry Finn is narrated by Huck himself. He relates his adventures as he travels down the Mississippi River on a raft with a runaway slave named Jim. The book satirizes antebellum Southern society and the constraints of civilization, which both Huck and Jim are attempting to escape. Mark Twain’s use of dialects is one of the most original and influential aspects of the novel, and in many ways sets it apart as a masterwork of American literature. However, his use of dialect has also sparked controversy.

Almost immediately upon publication, the rough language Huck uses evoked calls for excluding the book from libraries. As the Boston Transcript reported in March, 1885, that the Concord, Massachusetts, public library committee “decided to exclude Mark Twain’s latest book from the library. One member of the committee says that, while he does not wish to call it immoral, he thinks it contains but little humor, and that of a very coarse type. He regards it as the veriest trash.” Mark Twain responded that the calls for censorship would only help sell more copies.

Since the novel’s publication, it has been removed from libraries or schools in Denver (in 1902), New York City (1957), Winnetka, Illinois (1976), San Jose, California (1995), and many other places. As late as the mid-1990’s efforts to remove it from classroom use failed in Plano, Texas, and Tempe, Arizona. The civil liberties group People for the American Way estimated that Adventures of Huckleberry Finn was the third most-challenged book in America in 1996.

The most common reason for the controversy is the frequency with which Huck uses the racial epithet “nigger” to describe Jim. Although Huck clearly evolves over the course of the story in his appreciation of Jim as a friend, father figure, and human being (he even opts to risk damnation for helping Jim seek freedom), many critics have pointed out that Huck often portrays Jim as a shallow character with minstrel-like comic simplicity.

Late twentieth century debates have moved from the question of whether the book should be taught to how and at what level it should be taught. Scholars have shown that Mark Twain himself held sophisticated and enlightened views on race, slavery, and post-reconstruction treatment of African Americans. Many scholars and teachers have advocated adding historical context to the learning process, so that students are better prepared to decode the language and grapple with the deeper moral and historical issues the book raises.

Bibliography


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