Why Huck Finn Belongs in Classroom

Twain's work sparks the kind of frank discussions about race and race relations that we need-and fear-to have

By Jocelyn Chadwick

In the American Library Association’s recently published list of the 100 most frequently challenged books of the 1990s, Adventures of Huckleberry Finn ranked fifth. In fact, Samuel Clemens/Mark Twain had the dubious distinction of having written two of the only three pre-twentieth-century books on the list. (The Adventures of Tom Sawyer was number 83, and Helen Bannerman's blatantly racist The Story of Little Black Sambo was number 90.) Clearly, much controversy remains about whether Mark Twain had racist attitudes and whether he displayed those attitudes in his works, especially Adventures of Huckleberry Finn.

Stereotypes in his portrayal of the character Jim, excessive use of the racial slur "nigger," and a paternalistic attitude toward African Americans are among the charges made against Twain by his would-be banners. Are these charges valid, and if so, do they implicate Mark Twain as a racist? Twain scholar Lou Budd has asserted that Twain had "conflicting, conflicted attitudes" about the racial issues of his time. And while I acknowledge the likely truth in Budd's assertion, I would also argue that, given the time in which Twain wrote, this can be seen as a minor indictment of Clemens the man and an even lesser one of Twain the writer.

As an African American, I know that I would rather be in a room with a person who is working through his position on race and inequality than with an incorrigible racist. Certainly racist attitudes of any kind, even if they stem from "conflicting, conflicted attitudes" and membership in a culture steeped in racial oppression, are unacceptable. But what are essential and substantial are the decisions we make and the concomitant actions we take as a result of our attitudes. We cannot, therefore, overlook the works of Twain that do address the issues of race and stereotype.

Clearly, Twain used his writing to work through issues of race for himself and his society, and when I read Twain's satires, I feel that he "gets it." Despite the culture surrounding him, Twain understood deeply that racism is wrong. For Twain to have depicted in Adventures of Huckleberry Finn a young hero who questioned racial inequality and an African American who was caring, compassionate, and strongly committed to his freedom was revolutionary indeed.

Moreover, The Tragedy of Pudd'nhead Wilson more than nods at Twain's interest-or, rather more appropriately, his concern-about race. In this novel Twain turns on its proverbial ear the misconception of racial inferiority as evidenced through language acquisition. Roxy, a slave woman who gives birth to a child sired by the slave master, switches her baby with that of the slave master's wife to avoid having her son sold down South. Both children grow up adapting perfectly to their environments. Through the strength of Roxy's character and the results of her actions, Twain makes clear that racial inferiority is not inherent (as many in his time believed) and that voice and language can be acquired by anyone who is put in the right environmental circumstances.

Consider the Context
Twain's views and depictions of African Americans must also be considered in the context of African Americans' changing notions of themselves between 1835 and 1910. We know concretely through African American periodicals published during the period and through slave narratives published both during the period and during the early 1930s through the WPA project that African Americans viewed themselves and their place in the North and South in varying ways. But one constant that emerges over and over again—from the precise and articulate periodicals such as The Elevator to the narratives transcribed in heavy Southern dialect—is the desire to be understood and appreciated as a thinking individual. This is a view of African Americans that Twain, especially in Pudd'nhead Wilson, depicted strongly. Paralleling this view, too, was an abiding and deep appreciation among African Americans for any white person who displayed a scintilla of concern, let alone a proclivity for voicing or displaying that concern. If the African Americans of Twain's time could recognize the extraordinariness of whites who dared question the prevailing social structures, can't we as contemporary readers do the same?

By now, I'm sure it's clear that I believe Adventures of Huckleberry Finn must remain in classrooms throughout the country. It is educative not only for African Americans, but for anyone sitting in an American literature survey course. Does it stand in lieu of a good, substantive American history class that addresses African Americans' experiences under slavery? Of course not, but it certainly rounds out that experience. This is especially true in school districts that for budgetary or other reasons do not have access to many novels by African Americans who were Twain's contemporaries. But even if a district does have a budget that allows it to purchase class sets of Frances Harper's Iola Leroy, for example, it is still important to include a Twain novel, especially Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, in the curriculum.

Through the controversy surrounding this book alone, Twain brings into schools what all of us in this country desperately need, yet fear, most: discussions—frank discussions—about race, race relations, interracial relations, race language, racial stereotypes and profiling, and, ultimately, true and unadulterated racial equality. Does he ask all the pertinent questions and provide effective and lasting solutions? No. How could he? How could African American writers such as William Wells Brown, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, Ralph Ellison, George Schuyler, or even the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. do the same?

In no way am I asserting that this novel is the ultimate answer to discussing race relations in this country or even in the English/language arts classroom. What I am asserting is that change begins, must begin, with one individual. And while that one individual who connects with someone else will not cauterize the racial chasm, the connection does create a ripple in the great racial ocean that continues concentrically. By questioning racism in his own time and provoking discussion in ours, Twain provides just such a connection for many students.

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