

Race and huckleberry finn: the ongoing debate for schools

[Business](#)



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

“ Was Mark Twain a misguided liberal or an unconscious racist?” raised Darryl Wellington. This question has baffled scholars since the publishing of Twain’s novel *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. First published in 1885, the novel has been considered one of the most controversial in American Literature. Americans in the Reconstruction Era criticized the novel not because of its racist tendencies but because of its use of the informal American spoken language.

Activists during the Civil Rights Movement of the 60s condemned the novel because of its use of the word “ nigger” and the stigmas attached to race in a forcibly integrated classroom. Today we view race in a completely different way than Americans 40 years ago, yet school administrators are still having the debate as to whether *Huckleberry Finn* should be taught in public schools. The novel is written as a testament to the humanism of slaves in the south. Although I grant that *Huckleberry Finn* has a negative racist overtone, I still insist that the novel should be taught in schools but only under certain circumstances. At first glance, African Americans in the novel seem to be portrayed negatively, for example Jim personifies the white stereotype of Black slaves in the South.

Adversaries feel that Jim has a foolish ignorant childlike depiction, but contrary to the alleged negative stereotyping, Ann Lew, High school teacher and author of “ Teaching Huck Finn in a Multiethnic Classroom”, avers that “ Jim is consistently shown to be smart, assertive, and compassionate.”(17) Jim teaches Huck not only about the humanism of slaves, but also about himself; for instance, in the novel Huck learns to see Jim in a different light.

Traveling on the raft in the darkness, Jim mourns to see his family and Huck
<https://assignbuster.com/race-and-huckleberry-finn-the-ongoing-debate-for-schools/>

concludes, “ I do believe he cared for his people as much as white folks does for their’n.” (Twain 117) Twain uses the link between the blacks and whites as a way to show the humanism of slaves. Not all people in the south agreed with slavery and many felt slavery to be a necessary evil. Huck even goes as far to say that Jim, a runaway slave, is “ white inside”, which can be considered the best compliment that a white person would give a slave.

(Twain 207) The odds that a white boy and runaway slave could grow to have such a deep friendship is extremely improbable for the time period; however, this notion is brilliantly conceived from the abolitionist mind of Mark Twain. Twain has important things to say to people about the notion of equality between Blacks and Caucasians; but in order to show students the importance of Huckleberry Finn, students need to be aware of the treatment of blacks socially before diving right into the reading of the novel. Then, students will understand how immaculately unique Mark Twain was to write a novel equalizing slaves to whites. In order for America to move past racism, the new generation needs to understand the significance of following your own path and being yourself; the novel positively incorporates this idea. The characterization of whites and their treatment of slaves in the novel also cause a potential disposition for advocates wanting to band the novel from schools. The treatment of blacks can cause for awkward discussion in the classroom, but Jim portrays a historically accurate slave in the era; whites are the ones that are portrayed as the foolish and immature beings.

Lew asserts that “ Jim is the only decent adult” in the story: Huck’s father is an abusive drunk, the fatherly men Huck meets on his travels are corrupt,

and the king and duke are cowardly con artists. (20) Jim, the only developed adult character, seems to have a heart and actually care for Huck. Because of the way Huck treated Jim in the beginning of the novel Hyejin Kim, author of "Black, White, and Huckleberry Finn", Denies "the notion that Huck is developed enough to overcome his racism"; however, I disagree. (185) The climax of the novel, Huck plans to write a letter to send to Jim's owner about where she can get her property, but then he starts to think about the things that Jim had done for him; he tears up the letter and says "all right, then, I'll go to hell". (Twain 162) Huck proving that race isn't an issue, he is willing to sacrifice himself for the freedom of his black friend Jim. Huck evolves through the novel, becoming a better person because of the companionship of a slave; Jim being the first person to treat Huck as an equal and Huck being the first person to see Jim as an equal.

Twain wrote the only likeable adult to be a black runaway slave; not one other adult in the novel is even remotely friendly and it is important for the students to understand the controversial view of the white man in this novel. The apparent racial divide between the whites and the blacks has become a main issue for the critics of the novel. Huck in the beginning of the novel only sees Jim as property that means nothing to him. Huck and the other characters use the word "nigger", an informal name for the southern slaves, over 200 times in reference to Jim and the other slaves in the novel; activists automatically see the frequent use of the "n-word" as proof to the question of Twain racism. Kelley R. Taylor asserts that the word "carries within it a deep-rooted history tied to many years of denigration of Blacks" from Colonial America up and through the Civil Rights Movement.

<https://assignbuster.com/race-and-huckleberry-finn-the-ongoing-debate-for-schools/>

(61) The discussion of the word's usage in the novel remains by far the most controversial issue in the text, still Taylor points out that some administrators feel that " despite the constant inclusion of the offensive word" the novel still has an educational merit for students. (61) In order to keep the classroom environment comfortable, the word " nigger" should never be read out loud and should only be referred to as the " n-word". Although the issue of race has calmed within the new generation, racial diversity is still a sensitive topic for American Public Schools; it is important for students to understand the historical background of the south in order to get the full effect of the novel. Taylor agrees saying students should " learn about the evolution of the [n-word] and its past and present use" before reading the novel. (62) In order to avoid tension the word should never be used; reading " nigger" is far different from saying " nigger" and speaking the word only allows for an awkward and standoffish environment for the students.

Mark Twain once said " A classic is a book that people praise but don't read." As a fictional story about the historical slave south, Huckleberry Finn continues to enlighten people on the issue of race. No matter how insignificant racism becomes in America, up until the time where mankind becomes one race, tensions are going to coexist between the different ethnic groups. Students need to be informed On these issues, especially the non black Americans that aren't repeatedly beaten with the epithet of Black history and oppression in America. The Spoken language and ideology of the south in the 1850's, is an important concern on which Americans need to be informed.

<https://assignbuster.com/race-and-huckleberry-finn-the-ongoing-debate-for-schools/>

I agree that the novel brings about tensions and awkwardness in a classroom setting, but the message behind the rough exterior of the novel to an extent, is far more important than the complacency of a classroom. Huckleberry Finn is a classic and the information presented should not just be taken advantage of. The novel should be required reading in schools in order to keep students aware of the past literature in the south, but only under certain circumstances; teachers and school administrators need to be appropriately mindful of racial and ethnic sensitivities and be well prepared to address a variety of issues with students. Educators would furthermore benefit from a standardized set of ground rules for presenting the sensitive material of Huckleberry Finn; they must also consider the demographics of their classroom and take the precautions to keep the classroom as accommodating as possible. In order to embrace our future we need to understand the deep complexities of our past.

The new generation is our future and this novel is part of our past.