

The use of n-word: controversy in "the adventures of huckleberry finn"

[Literature](#), [American Literature](#)



Throughout the centuries aggressions against minority groups and the condonation that goes with these hateful acts has been one of the biggest controversies being faced around the world, and Huck Finn is no exception. It's not shocking to believe that 126 years since the American classic has been published that the novel is still a huge controversy. Since the day *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain hit the shelves it has caused tension between people of different beliefs and understandings of the racial correlation Twain presents in the novel including the use of the word, nigger. Since the novel is supposedly one of the greatest pieces of American literature it must seem vital to have it be taught in schools. A report conducted in 1992 showed that 70 percent of all public school students, and 76 percent of all religious school students, studied the novel in school. And still today the book gets assigned but more often than it should it's a modified version of the original text in order for students to feel 'more comfortable'. By removing nigger from it the novel loses a certain quality to it; its wildness and edginess, and a chunk of the real message it is trying to convey. The strong language used in the novel unquestionably serves a purpose because it's supposed to showcase Huck's lifestyle, and realistically in Huck's world, "nigger" wouldn't be censored out. More recently than ever there has been a call to censor the novel for schools and to alter the text completely for people outside of schools. A publishing company in Alabama says that schools don't have to change their reading list because they changed *Huckleberry Finn*. Their newly released edition removes the N-word and replaces it with "slave." Randall Williams, co-owner and editor of NewSouth Books states "I think it says that race continues to be a volatile and divisive

subject." "Slave is a condition. I mean, anybody can be a slave. And it's nothing for anybody to be ashamed of. But ' nigger' has to do with shame. ' Nigger' has to do with calling somebody something. ' Nigger' was what made slavery possible". Others argue something different though.

Author David Bradley who is a professor at the University of Oregon says that the key to understanding Huckleberry Finn is through Twain's language, as the relationship between Huck and Jim grows. What needs to be understood is that The word " nigger" is not a hurtful word. It is how it is being used in context and who is saying it that makes it hurtful. This novel takes place before the civil war when it was socially acceptable to say nigger, and that's the problem. People can't escape from our modern day world and see this story from a different perspective. A white male according to history wouldn't realistically replace nigger with a slave. When you censor out nigger, you lose the reality of that word replace it with ' slave'. The language in the novel is the language that was used in this time period. We as a whole can't deny the terrible past by pretending it didn't exist.

Throughout the novel, Twain uses the N-word 219 times. To some people, the word gets in the way of the story's message against slavery, but to others, Twain is simply capturing the way people talked back then; which is the direction most people believed he was going in. As an author, he has a responsibility to make an audience feel an arrange of emotions when reading his work, and that's exactly what he does. He also had the responsibility to let go of some of his own personal bias to really commit to the story even though it is fiction. Twain grew up in a slave state and therefore witnessed it

first hand, but personally did not believe in slavery, and didn't own any when he was older. So even though Twain did not believe in slavery he still had characters in the novel who did believe in it, because he knew historically speaking, people in Huck's world wouldn't be against slavery even though personally Twain would want it that way. Twain was no doubt a brilliant man and he knew if a white southern male back then had the option to either say slave or nigger he would say, nigger.

Not only did Twain use this word choice for historical reasons he also picked it because he knew the effect it would have on the readers. Twain tries to embed the n-word in every chapter to really get that effect across to the readers like in chapter 14, "well he was right; he was almost right; he had an uncommon head for a nigger" (Twain, chapter 14). Historically Huck wouldn't replace nigger with a slave. In the quote, Huck doesn't say "nigger" to offend Jim, he says it because he doesn't know any better; it was accepted by society and it was how he was raised. Eleventh-grader Joseph Jaurdio explains it perfectly, "If you replace that with the word slave, of course, people would be less bothered, but I think Twain wants people to be a little bit bothered,". Twain's word choice conveys a message and is in there for a reason. Although there is clear-cut evidence that goes towards keeping the "nigger" in the novel, some people still can't seem to see where everyone else is coming from.

The Alabama school's principal where they have censored "nigger" from the novel said that it was "challenging for some students, who felt the school was not being inclusive...we've gone from being challenged to being

offended." Which can be respected but at the same time what's wrong with feeling challenged? Parents, teachers, and students are confusing being offended and being challenged. Not only does the book have "nigger" in it but it has a lot of misspelled words on purpose which can make it a challenging read, with challenging content in it besides the word choice. Some scenes like when Huck's father is being abusive towards him, that could easily make people feel uncomfortable but not offended. People blame the reason they're uncomfortable on the language in the book because it's easy to blame it. "I smiled because like I just kind of think that constant use (of) the N-word, and to me, it feels unnecessary...It reflects on African-American history back then. And like I said, it's a history that nobody wants to relive," the principal said. Although it's understandable to see how the constant use of "nigger" in the novel can lose its effect after a while and then it's just there for the fun of it, but that's completely untrue. It is supposed to have an impact on the readers, and it clearly does have an impact or else there wouldn't be a debate going on about it. Yes, the principal is right, it does represent African-American history back then, but it's a history that can't be rewritten or forgotten.

The fact that schools around the country are censoring Huck Finn is disrespectful towards all the history that is backing it up and it's disrespecting the author. The word is there for a purpose: to represent the time period's history and culture. Even though what is socially accepted is different today than back then doesn't mean we ignore it, it means we learn to respect it.