

# The Controversial and Divisive History of Huckleberry Finn

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*Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain has remained an instantly recognizable book to most Americans since its release in the United States on February 18, 1885. Now, nearly one hundred and forty years later, it's considered by the Library of Congress to be one of the "Books That Shaped America" (Billington). In the last one hundred and forty years, over twenty million copies have been sold.

Despite its success, it may be one of the most controversial classic novels in American history. The American Library Association placed *Huck Finn* on its list of the top 10 most challenged books for the 2002 and 2007 school years (ALA). Challenging Twain's novel is not exclusive to the twenty-first century, however. It was first pulled from bookshelves in March of 1885, a mere month after its release. *Huckleberry Finn* has remained divisive among school administrators, parents, critics, and literary theorists throughout its entire publication history.

The debates surrounding *Huck Finn* have changed and evolved since the late nineteenth century. Upon release, the main debates regarded Huck's behavior, the morals present (or not present) in the novel, and Twain's humor. By the early twentieth century, many of those complaints seem to have fizzled out or evolved. They were replaced by literary discussions regarding the ending, or debating whether or not *Huckleberry Finn* was truly a "great American novel." As the twentieth century progressed, discussions turned to the way Twain handled race in the novel. Many began to question and analyze how Twain characterized Jim, the slave that Huck joins on an adventure towards freedom. By the late twentieth century, this theme was still being discussed, and would transition into the next controversy that surrounded the novel: its use of the n-word. That is the controversy modern readers will find themselves most familiar with, as it is still being discussed today. In this paper, the controversies will be presented and discussed in chronological order.

*Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* began its long tradition of being banned in March of 1885, when the Public Library of Concord, Massachusetts elected not to have Twain's newest novel on their shelves. The librarian and the library's committee told the *Boston Transcript* that the novel was "rough, coarse and inelegant" and that the book was "suited to the slums than to intelligent, respectable people" (Mailer). Louisa May Alcott, the well-known author of the children's book *Little Women*, was a member of this committee. Alcott likely believed that Twain intended the novel's audience to be children (The University of Virginia Library). She was far from the only person to think this. Even a positive review of the novel from the *Saturday Review*, written in January of 1885, refers to the novel as

“juvenile fiction” (Matthews). Alcott, being a children’s fiction writer, likely believed that authors writing for younger audiences had an obligation to present the best values possible. By making Huck disobedient and by implementing humor that may not have been suitable for children, Twain was doing a disservice to children in Alcott’s eyes (Black 15).

When presenting these arguments, it’s important to note that Mark Twain did not intend for the novel to be a work of juvenile fiction. In a letter regarding *Huck Finn* to W.D. Howells, he stated the novel was “not a boy’s book, at all. It will only be read by adults. It is only written for adults” (Twain 361). Twain also seems to have expected some backlash regarding the morals presented in the novel. At the very start of the novel, a warning reads that “persons attempting to find a moral in it will be banished” (Twain 3). These may have been two precautions Twain attempted to take in order to avoid backlash posed by those like Alcott. Regardless of Twain’s intention, it’s clear that readers then thought the novel was intended for younger audiences, and today that still remains true. Amazon is selling a new box set of American classic novels for children 7 and up featuring *Huckleberry Finn*, pictured below. Ironically, *Little Women* is also included in the set.



(Amazon et al.)

The humor of *Huck Finn* was also a point of contention for critics at the time of its publication, no matter who the intended audience was meant to be. Two separate reviews, both from Boston newspapers in March of 1885, cited Twain's humor as one of the novel's major flaws. The *Boston Evening Traveler* stated "Mr. Clemens has contributed some humorous literature that is excellent and will hold its place, but his Huckleberry Finn appears to be singularly flat, stale and unprofitable[.]" In addition, the *Boston Daily Advertiser* wrote "here and there are patches of Mark Twain's best work... but one cannot have the book long in his hands without being tempted to regret that the author should so often have laid himself open to the charge of coarseness and bad taste." Much like all other aspects of the novel, this was not agreed upon by all critics. An 1885 review from *The Atlanta Constitution* said "the humor is sometimes excessive, but it is genuine humor." Mark Twain was known for his humor, so it was often discussed in reviews of his works at the time. Twain was known as a humorist. With so many reviews of *Huck Finn* criticizing the humor, one may think the novel would be a failure. That was far from the case. According to Andrew Levy, the biographer of *Huck Finn's America*, "between 1885 and 1895 it was one of the top ten best-selling books" (Levy 158).

As America entered the twentieth century, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* proved that the discourse surrounding it would not stay in the past. While the debate around its morals, values, and humor largely stopped, debates around other content in the novel appeared. It's difficult to find many criticisms from the very early twentieth century, but by the 1950s, the novel had undeniably become a classic, and literary theorists and critics were beginning to analyze it in ways not done to it before.

The ending of the novel was one of the most criticized elements of the novel at this time. At the end of the novel, we learn that Jim has been freed by Miss Watson upon her death. Leo Marx, a well-known literary critic, wrote of the ending: "I believe that the ending of *Huckleberry Finn* makes so many readers uneasy because they rightly sense that it jeopardizes the significance of the entire novel" (Levine et al. 292). One major hangup Marx had with the ending was how Jim was freed. Not only did his owner (who was previously going to sell him) free him, but by the end of the novel we know he has been free for months at this point. Another issue Marx took with the ending was the regression of Huck's development from the titular character to Tom Sawyer's sidekick yet again. Marx writes "most of those traits which made him so appealing a hero, now disappear." Even Ernest Hemingway, who felt that "all modern American literature" came from *Huck Finn*, criticized the ending, stating that the reader should stop when "Jim is stolen from the boys [sic]. That is the real end. The rest is just cheating" (Hansen 45). As with all other aspects of this novel, not everyone was in agreement about the ending. T.S. Eliot had more positive sentiments about it, writing that it "rounds off the story and brings the reader back to the level of the childish, boyish beginning" (Gullason 45).

By the time most of these opinions were publicly emerging, the novel was nearing sixty years old. At this point, it was a classic, and was being taught in schools across the country. If Hemingway is right, then the novel inspired tons of other American literary works. Yet, the ending, or last third of the novel, was so unsatisfying to some that they wrote entire literary papers analyzing why they disliked it. Many of those critics seem to have thought the ending made the rest of the work pointless or insignificant. Interestingly enough, this topic is still discussed often online and in classrooms.

Likely, when modern audiences think of the controversial aspects of *Huck Finn*, one of the first thoughts that cross their minds regards how Twain handled racial elements in his book. For example, the book's use of racial slurs. From the sixties onward, this seems to have become one of the most discussed topics surrounding the novel. However, one might wonder why such a significant criticism has not been mentioned up to this point.

Andrew Levy writes that "in the black newspapers, Twain was invisible, and his book seemingly ignored" at the time of the book's publication (Levy 154). Since the novel did get a decent amount of coverage otherwise, it's possible that this was an intentional choice not to cover Twain or *Huck Finn* in these newspapers. Like the late nineteenth century, it is also difficult or nearly impossible to find sources from the early twentieth century discussing how Twain characterized black Americans in his novel. However, around the time of the civil rights movement in America, more criticisms of Jim's characterization began to emerge. In 1963, Chadwick Hansen wrote a paper that actually largely defends Jim's character, yet he still writes that the "dialogue might have come from any minstrel show" and that Jim is "part of a more general type-character, who is often the butt of low comedy, and whose essential quality is his insensitivity to mental or to physical pain" (Hansen 46-48).

Many critics have likened Jim's character to a minstrel. A minstrel was a performer that caricatured stereotypes of African Americans. This often included blackface, which utilizes makeup to mock a black person's appearance. While there were still blackface performances in popular media past the sixties, the Jim Crow Museum website states that "the civil rights movement forced the end of the amateur minstrel show" (Comer). However, they were still popular forms of entertainment when Twain was writing *Huck Finn*. In fact, Twain himself was a fan of minstrel shows, and included one in *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (Levy 30).

While there are no minstrel shows or blackface present in *Huck Finn*, an argument can be made that Jim himself exists as a minstrel. He was written by a white man, for a form of entertainment, and he features exaggerated stereotypes of a black person. Literary critic Ralph Ellison wrote in 1958 that "Twain fitted Jim into the outlines of the minstrel tradition" and Huck seems more like the adult within the novel (Twain 388). Ellison felt

that Jim's characterization made black readers uncomfortable. This could be one reason it took so long for it to be criticized by black readers. Another possibility is that by this point, because of the civil rights movement, black critics were no longer having their voices silenced. More people were willing to listen to their arguments.

Like the arguments surrounding the ending, the characterization of Jim has continued to be analyzed and discussed as people become more willing to understand and learn about racism in classic literature. In 1984, author Julius Lester wrote that "Jim is a plaything, an excuse for 'the adventure of it,' to be used as it suits the fancies of the white folk" (Levine et al. 296). When *Huckleberry Finn* was listed as one of the most challenged books in 2007 by the ALA, the only reason cited was racism. However, the stereotypical nature of Jim's character is far from the only racial element that readers may find themselves uncomfortable with.

The last controversy that will be discussed in this paper is likely the one modern readers are most familiar with. In *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, the n-word is used over two hundred times (Kaufman). This has been one of the most commonly cited reasons for censoring or banning the book, especially from classrooms. The book was banned from classrooms in Winnetka, Illinois in 1976. This is one of the earliest examples of the book being banned due to its use of the racial slur. John H. Wallace, a public school official, discusses the reasoning behind schools banning *Huck Finn* in the 20th century in his essay 'The Case Against Huck Finn'. He describes the novel as "the most grotesque example of racist trash ever written" (Twain 375). Wallace argued that the language was making students, teachers, and parents uncomfortable. Many have instead elected to read and teach censored versions of the novel that omit the racial slur entirely. Alan Gribben wrote in an introduction to a censored version of *Huck Finn*, "students and audience members seemed to prefer this expedient, and I could detect a visible sense of relief each time" (Levine et al. 303).

Some argue that censoring *Huck Finn* is a bad idea. Many point to the idea that Twain was likely using the slur synonymously with the word "slave." Due to this, many censored versions have replaced the slur with "slave" entirely. Michiko Kakutani, a literary critic, believes censoring the novel in this way is a bad idea. She writes "attaching the epithet *slave* to the character Jim—who has run away in a bid for freedom—effectively labels him as property, the very thing he is trying to escape" (Levine et al. 304). In a response to several schools banning the book in the eighties, African American writer Toni Morrison wrote that it was "a purist yet elementary kind of censorship designed to appease adults rather than educate children" (Levine et al. 301).

The debate of whether or not to censor *Huck Finn* is one that continues on in the twenty-first century. In 2011, writer and critic Lorrie Moore published an opinion piece in the *New York Times* about the novel.

She called for the novel to be taught exclusively in college classrooms, where it can be properly contextualized (Moore). Similarly, in 2022, the Burbank Unified School District in California removed *Huckleberry Finn* and several other books that use the racial slur from classroom reading lists. However, they did not ban the books from the library for individual student reading and have allowed teachers to use them in small groups so long as the teachers have undergone “training on facilitating conversations on racism, implicit bias, and racial identity” (Marshall University).

In some ways, it seems that the controversies surrounding *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* have come full circle. It began by being criticized for the lack of morals presented to young audiences, and now, nearly one hundred and forty years later, the main debate that surrounds it is whether or not it should be taught in schools, to young audiences. Whether Mark Twain ever imagined the novel could become a great American classic, or the novel that “all modern American literature” came from, as Hemingway put it, is impossible to know. However, there is a lot of significance in the fact that the novel is still being discussed with such passion so many years later, and those discussions have hardly wavered since its release.

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