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Masterpiece or Racist Trash?: Bridgewater Students Enter the Debate over Huckleberry Finn

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This article by Barbara Apstein appeared in the June 2000 issue of the Bridgewater Review.

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Despite its status as one of the classic American novels, *Huckleberry Finn* has always been a controversial book. Shortly after it was published in 1885, the Concord, Massachusetts, Public Library Committee decided to exclude Twain’s novel from its shelves, dismissing it as “trash…more suited to the slums than to intelligent, respectable people.” Warily approving the library’s decision, contemporary newspapers denounced Huck Finn as a “trashy and vicious” novel, whose characters and action were of a low moral level. Yet some early readers had words of praise: William Ernest Henley was delighted with the story, with its “adventures of the most surprising and delightful kind imaginable.” Another early reviewer, Brander Matthews, admired Twain’s technique, especially the “marvelous skill with which the character of Huck is maintained” throughout the novel, we see all the action through the eyes of a 14-year-old country boy. Matthews also found *Huckleberry Finn* “fresh and original” and praised Twain’s fertility of invention, humor and vividness. He also praised the depiction of blacks, and Huck firmly believes that he is morally obligated to report him. In the famous “crisis of conscience” scene, Huck decides to “do the right thing” and write to Jim’s owner, Miss Watson, telling her where she can reclaim her missing slave. Then, remembering about their companionship on the raft, remembering Jim’s generosity, “how good he always was,” Huck changes his mind. Following his “heart,” he tears up the letter, implicitly rejecting the moral code of the “darky”: he is superstitious and kind. An angel of Jim and other black characters. They appear on almost every page, and to the portrayal of Jim and other black characters. Specifically, they objected to the inflammatory word “nigger,” which appears on every page, and to the portrayal of Jim and other black characters. They argued that Jim embodies the stereotype of Jim and other black characters. They argued that Jim embodies the stereotype of the “darky”: he is superstitious and gullible, and often appears more child-like than Huck himself. As a result of these protests, some school districts removed *Huckleberry Finn* from required reading lists. The protests have continued for half a century, and the controversy shows no signs of abating. Last year the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People again filed grievances to remove *Twain’s* novel from mandatory reading lists.
Masterpiece or Racist Trash?

Barbara Apstein

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Supporters of *Huckleberry Finn* argue that anyone who reads the book carefully can see that Twain is in fact anti-slavery and anti-racist. Jim is, in fact, the best person in the novel: honest, perceptive and fast-minded, a loving father and loyal friend. In contrast, the white characters include, among others, Huck’s father, a child-abusing drunkard; the Duke and King, who are frauds and swindlers, and the Grangerfords and Shepherds, two feuding clans whose main purpose in life is the murder of as many of their enemies as possible. Thoughtful examination of Twain’s use of the word “nigger” can help teach students the importance of understanding the context in which a word is used. They will discover that, although clearly a derogatory term, “nigger” was not in Twain’s time a powerful taboo word that it is today. Judge Stephen Reinhardt, rejecting a lawsuit by an African-American parent, addressed this issue, writing that “Words can hurt, particularly racist epithets, but a necessary component of any education is learning to think critically about offensive ideas.”
Where do Bridgewater students stand in this debate? My “Writing About Literature” class read *Huckleberry Finn* and examined the controversy surrounding it. The class of 20 included only one black student, Colleen Roberts, who was placed in the potentially uncomfortable position of being spokesperson for her race. The issue surfaced early in our discussions; as the class considered the impact of the word “nigger,” a student posed the obvious question: “Shouldn’t we ask Colleen what she thinks?” Fortunately, Colleen poised and articulate, gracefully accepted the role which had been thrust upon her. She expressed her own bewilderment at hearing rap musicians and black teenagers use “nigger” among themselves as a synonym for “friend.” Was this an effort to take away the power of this historically degrading word? Clearly, although “nigger” may be acceptable for at least some blacks to use among themselves, the word becomes deeply offensive when uttered by a white person.

In their papers about the controversy, the white students in the class concluded that *Huckleberry Finn* does not encourage racist attitudes. “We have to look beyond the word ‘nigger,’” they wrote. “This is a literary masterpiece.” “In Twain’s time, ‘nigger’ was a synonym for ‘slave’.” “The language is appropriate to the setting and time.” “The portrayal of Jim proves that the racial stereotype of Twain’s day was wrong.”

Colleen, however, decided otherwise. She enjoyed and appreciated the novel; she saw that Jim was the book’s most admirable character. She considered all the arguments. What it finally came down to, however, was that she found the book painful to read. She was angered by the fact that Jim was a mere sidekick to Huck and that “he didn’t seem to mind having no vote, no say, during their adventures, in what to do next.” She resented his being reduced to a clown, and, in the final chapters, a plaything for the amusement of Huck and Tom Sawyer. She felt disappointed that the relationship between Jim and Huck cannot continue. In addition to reaching a different conclusion from the white students’, Colleen’s paper was different in tone. For her, this essay was not an academic exercise; it was the outcome of an intellectual quest. “While I cherish my friends who happen to be white,” she wrote in her conclusion, “I realize the burning race issues of Huck’s day have not gone away; they are just dressed in different clothes. Facing them and not lighting out to another territory is what I must do without bitterness.”

One thing all the members of the class could agree on: *Huckleberry Finn* could be a difficult text to teach. As future teachers themselves, they weren’t sure they could pull it off. Learning to think critically about offensive ideas, they agreed, is a noble goal, but teachers need to make careful judgments about which offensive ideas should be presented to classes of teenagers. They could imagine a tense and emotionally volatile classroom, one that might be difficult to control.

The consensus was that it might be wise to reserve *Huckleberry Finn* for mature high school seniors or college students. In fact, some teachers appear to have reached the same conclusion. Shawn Oakley, a member of our class who had been working with a sixth grade teacher, reported that he had come across 30 copies of *Huckleberry Finn* in a closet at the back of the classroom. The books were covered with dust.

—Barbara Apstein is Retired Professor of English and Editor Emerita of the Bridgewater Review. This article by Barbara Apstein appeared in the June 2000 issue of the Bridgewater Review.