

Bleeping Mark Twain?: Censorship, *Huckleberry Finn*, and the Functions of Literature  
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**ABSTRACT:** The most recent controversy over the use of *that word* in the *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* highlights the interactions among writing, editing, teaching, and reading, and this serves as a point of entry into a discussion of the function of literature itself. For many, works like *Huckleberry Finn* are touchstone texts for both enjoying and studying literature, inasmuch as the delights and the lessons of the novel spark an interest in further reading. NewSouth Books' publication of an edition of the novel that substitutes the word "slave" for the famously offensive epithet has been roundly criticized by scholars and laypersons alike. However, as editor Alan Gribben explains, the intent of this "censorship," as it is most often called, is to expand the readership and extend the influence of the novel. In his introduction, Gribben emphatically endorses the use of other, non-expurgated editions, but insists that this NewSouth Edition is intended to bring new and younger readers to Twain's masterpiece, a worthy goal, as most critics would agree. In this essay, Robert T. Tally Jr. examines the controversy over censoring *Huckleberry Finn* as part of a larger debate over the role of literature in education and in the world.

*Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is perhaps the most famous, most beloved, and most controversial novel featuring a prominent black character and written by a white author. Extremely popular in its own day and in the decades that followed, Mark Twain's novel became one of the most holy of the canonical texts of American literature once mid-twentieth-century critics discovered in it the key to the American experience and an uplifting illustration of the American spirit. The influential critic Lionel Trilling, in *The Liberal Imagination*, asserted that Huck Finn and Jim formed a "community of saints," and Trilling effectively established the novel as national monument (104, 106). However, the eupeptic effect of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* on the body politic is not as indisputable as many of its apologists would have it, and during the last 30 years controversies have arisen over use of the novel in the classroom, particularly given the frequent appearance in the book of a well-known, and offensive, racial epithet. The story is presented as a meandering and quixotic tale of a poor, white boy and his boon companion, a runaway slave, as they make their way down river, deeper and deeper into the slave-holding South, until they reach a problematic but seemingly happy ending, in which the adventures come to an abrupt end with Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn playing a dangerous game with Jim. It is then discovered that, unbeknownst to Jim and to Huck, that Jim had already been set free, and so he was not a runaway slave after all, at which point Jim disappears from the text entirely. Twain's Mississippi River odyssey, with its local color and vaudeville-styled humor,

is narrated by Huck himself, who manages to refer to Jim and to all African Americans by one of the most offensive terms in the modern English language some 213 times. For many readers, the *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is therefore a work that causes embarrassment, pain, and resentment. As a hypercanonized text, one frequently included as required reading not only in college classrooms, but also in high school and even earlier, Twain's 1885 novel continues to be a controversial touchstone for discussion of race in the United States today.

The controversy over the recently published NewSouth Edition of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (Gribben) raises once more the question of censorship and of the functions of literature, more generally.<sup>1</sup> Edited by Alan Gribben, an established Mark Twain scholar who teaches at Auburn University at Montgomery, in Alabama, the NewSouth Edition notoriously substitutes what Gribben considers to be less offensive "synonyms" for Twain's original racial epithets, of which the *N-word* is both the most pervasive used term in the novels and the least acceptable in civil discourse today. (A caveat to the reader: I will use the offensive word in the body of the text below, but only in direct quotations, some of which come from books routinely given to schoolchildren as required reading.) Predictably, following the publication of the NewSouth Edition in 2011, a public outcry arose against it, as Mark Twain's would-be defenders lashed out against the "censorship," as they rushed to the apparent rescue of a literary masterpiece which was thought to be imperiled by yet another "politically correct" assault. Ironically, Gribben's own justification of the project of this NewSouth Edition is, in part, that it might help to save the great American novel by making it more suitable for classroom use in high schools or colleges. Gribben feared that, without a less offensive alternative, the near-omnipresence of such an inflammatory and controversial word might otherwise keep *Huckleberry Finn* off the syllabus. In the cases of both Gribben's expurgations and the defense of Twain's original language, an implicit question is, what is the function of a work of literature, in the classroom ... and in the world.

Before examining the controversy over the NewSouth Edition of *Huckleberry Finn* further, I would like to begin with a brief autobiographical anecdote, and I promise to keep it well under 500,000 words (i.e., the length of Twain's own recently published, unabridged autobiography). It occurs to me that I did not read the *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* in high school; or, rather, I read it on my own during those years, but it was never an assigned text. I

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<sup>1</sup> See Gribben. Unless otherwise noted, all references to *Huckleberry Finn* and to Gribben's "Editor's Introduction" cited parenthetically in the text will be to this edition.

entered ninth grade in 1982, the same year that John Wallace, an African American teacher at the Mark Twain Intermediate School in Fairfax, Virginia, famously (or infamously) condemned *Huckleberry Finn* as "racist trash" (see Molly Moore 1).<sup>2</sup> I do not know if my high school or its teachers made any deliberate choice to avoid *Huckleberry Finn*, but I can imagine that the controversial repetition of the *N-word* might have made both teachers and students uncomfortable. This would have been in what was then thought of as a fairly progressive region of the "New South" (yes!), North Carolina, and more particularly a somewhat urban, industrial, or technological locale, in the Piedmont region of that state, and Winston-Salem specifically. Although the area was, and remains, quite conservative politically, most of its citizens regardless of ethnicity would pride themselves on their enlightened attitudes toward race and race relations, and no one at my high school would have embraced the rhetoric of racial bigotry openly. Thus, I can imagine that it is at least possible that the presence of the *N-word* might have discouraged use of Twain's novel in the classroom.

One book that was in the ninth-grade classroom, both for me and for nearly everyone I know, was William Golding's haunting little novel from 1954, *The Lord of the Flies*. In the unforgettable, climactic moment of that book, the young heroes Piggy and Ralph approach the camp of the "wild boys," and Piggy, entreating them to embrace the mores of civilization once more, makes this heartfelt plea: "Which is better—to be a pack of painted Indians like you are, or to be sensible like Ralph is?" (Golding 180). At least, that is how the line reads in the copy we were given. In the terrific 1963 film adaptation, Piggy's line is slightly different: "Which is better—to be a pack of painted savages like you are, or to be sensible like Ralph is?" However, in the 1954 original, the same line reads: "Which is better—to be a pack of painted niggers like you are, or to be sensible like Ralph is?" Somehow, my edition was expurgated, with the term "Indian" replacing the incendiary *N-word*. In other words, someone had Bowdlerized this passage, substituting "Indians" for a more offensive term, but one which was also apparently intended to refer to a similar though distinct sort of "savage." (Let us leave aside for the moment the proposition that the phrase "painted Indians" might be as offensive.) One other note about my *Lord of the Flies* experience in high school: nowhere in my volume does it say that anything in the novel has been altered. The copyright date is still listed as 1954, and there is no evidence that the author himself, an editor, or the publisher might have emended any part of the text. I am

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<sup>2</sup> Wallace went on to publish his own edition of the novel, which removed all instances of both the *N-word* and the word "Hell."

not sure just who, but *someone* had protected me and my fellow (American) pupils from an offensive word, without comment and apparently without any controversy at all.<sup>3</sup>

Admittedly, one single use of the *N-word* is easier to replace, to "bleep" out or to alter, than some 213 uses, and a logic of comparative "savagery" or of comparative terminological offensiveness would not really rescue *Huckleberry Finn* from the discomfort of schoolchildren, their teachers, or parents. The NewSouth Edition edited by Gribben substitutes the word "slave" for the nearly ubiquitous *N-word*. (It also substitutes "Indian" for the more offensive *Injun* and "half-blood" for *half-breed*, a choice for which Gribben credits J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* for giving "a degree of panache" [14]). This editorial decision is obviously fraught with other problems, as I will discuss in a moment, but the intent behind the choice is clearly to make the novel more amenable to schoolteachers and more likely to be read by schoolchildren, both in middle schools and in high schools, and perhaps also at the collegiate level. To put it another way, Gribben's aim is to make a text with "adult" language available to minors who would not, and perhaps should not, be exposed to that sort of diction at that particular time in their lives.

Leslie Fiedler famously suggested that the classics of American literature had come to be seen as children's literature, more particularly "boys' books" (28).<sup>4</sup> Fiedler was thinking of the intrigue and warfare of James Fenimore Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans*, the sea voyages of Richard Henry Dana's *Two Years Before the Mast* and Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*, and above all Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, in which the youthful hero narrates his odyssey through a lawless wilderness. Of course, few or none of these writers intended that their audience be limited to, or even include, children, and Fiedler acknowledges this irony when he writes that modern American life seems typified by "its implacable nostalgia for the infantile, at once wrong-headed and somehow admirable" (27). Just as so many Americans long to be youthful, in looks or energy-levels or some perceived innocence, perhaps we want to turn our

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<sup>3</sup> I believe that only the American editions were changed in this manner. As far as I can tell, in the United Kingdom and in Commonwealth nations, the phrase "painted niggers" remained. For example, in the *Encyclopedia of Censorship*, Jonathan Green notes that, according to the Canadian Library Association, in 1988 "parents and members of the black community objected to a reference to 'niggers' and said it denigrates blacks" (Green 331).

<sup>4</sup> Fiedler's "Come Back to the Raft Ag'in, Huck Honey!" was originally published in the *Partisan Review* in 1948. It may be worth noting that the phrase used as the title appears nowhere in *Huckleberry Finn* itself.

mature literature back into child's play. But, as we sometimes rediscover on closer inspection, not everything in our library is suitable for all audiences.

This most recent controversy over the use of *that word* in the *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* highlights the interactions among writing, editing, teaching, and reading, and this serves as a point of entry into a discussion of the function of literature itself. What is literature? How ought it be used? For many, works like *Huckleberry Finn* are themselves primary and fundamental texts for both enjoying and studying literature, inasmuch as the delights as well as the lessons of the novel spark an interest in further reading. Since its publication in 2011, Gribben's NewSouth Edition has been roundly criticized by scholars and laypersons alike, primarily because of its substitution of the word *slave* for the almost ubiquitous *N-word*. And the word-substitutions do seem like a misguided attempt to clean up Huck's, and Twain's, language. However, as Gribben explains, the intent of this "censorship," as it is most often called, is to expand the readership and extend the influence of the novel. In fact, far from being an "attack" on an American classic, this edition is intended to save *Huckleberry Finn* from the oblivion to which it is destined, as more and more teachers refuse to include the novel on their reading lists. In his introduction, Gribben emphatically endorses the use of other, non-expurgated versions, and he specifically urges scholars to use other editions, but he insists that this NewSouth Edition is intended to bring new and younger readers to Twain's masterpiece. Most scholars and teachers of American literature would consider this a worthy goal. The question, then, is whether this form of "censorship" is an appropriate way to achieve such a goal.

Gribben's introduction straightforwardly explains the alterations in the text, as well as the rationale behind them, and Gribben explicitly directs "academic" readers to the "magisterial edition" produced by "the Mark Twain Project at Berkeley" (16). This honest acknowledgement and helpful guidance for more mature readers is welcome, I should think. This strikes me as far, far less of a sin against literature than the Orwellian erasure of history that occurs when Piggy warns against behaving like "painted Indians" in *The Lord of the Flies*, with no footnote or explanation concerning what had been altered.

Hence, the intent behind the NewSouth Edition, if not the execution, is commendable. Despite the understandable outcry of voices condemning NewSouth's and Gribben's literary crimes against Mark Twain, we all know that it is not uncommon to "bleep" parts of even great works of art when the audience includes minors. For example, if *The Godfather*—one of the greatest films in American cinema—can have its dialogue altered and its brief nudity excised in

order to make it suitable for television, then there is no inherent reason why *Huckleberry Finn* couldn't have its PG-rated version available in grade school, so long as the original can still be enjoyed elsewhere. Surely the "classic" works of American filmmaking deserve their own respect, and the films ought to have aesthetic integrity preserved, yet most of us will understand that certain words and images may be unsuitable for this or that audience, and we can make allowances accordingly. This brouhaha over the expurgated version of *Huckleberry Finn* again raises the question of how appropriate certain "classic" works of American literature may be for teenaged students. The publisher's rationale, in part, is that this edition will be more suitable for high school and college students embarrassed (or worse) by the repeated use of the offensive term. This is why Lorrie Moore, who is no fan of the NewSouth Edition, wants *Huckleberry Finn* to go to, and remain in, college (WK12).

In this as in other controversies over the novel, some of Twain's would-be defenders have rolled out the old arguments about the sanctity of literature, the "realistic" language of the time, and the book's generally salutary depiction of a poor white boy and an African American man as bosom companions. In this effort, they sometimes overlook the textual and historical evidence that makes these positions much more problematic than they appear. Further, as Jonathan Arac pointed out in his *Huckleberry Finn as Idol and Target*, such arguments frequently pit (largely white) persons of ostensible goodwill against (largely black) students, teachers, and parents, who are told that they are ignorant or that they are plain wrong for not whole-heartedly endorsing the required reading of the book—a book, I might note, which could not possibly be read aloud, word-for-word, on primetime network television. Defending Twain's use of the *N-word*, rather ironically, has sometimes meant forcing it upon the very people most hurt by its use.

As someone who teaches a lot of early American literature (but only at the college level), I regularly encounter the *N-word* in print. But students reading these texts are seldom encouraged to sympathize or to identify with the utterer of the word, as they are likely to be when Huck uses it. The *N-word* appears a few times in *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, but that book is narrated by an omniscient and sometimes ironic third-person narrator, not by the actual hero of the story. A handful of Edgar Allan Poe's narrators use the term—surprisingly few, in fact—but readers never confuse any Poe narrator with a representative American figure. In Frederick Douglass, it appears as a dirty word, used only by those whom the intended reader is invited to revile. But Huck, narrating his own story and using this word over 200 times, is not

seen as an odd-ball rube who doesn't know any better, which, after all, may have been closer to Twain's original intent, but as the heroic and iconic American whom all students should applaud. This can cause discomfort for many students, African American or not, who are suddenly told that the offensive term is not only acceptable in this context, but implicitly authorized by their teacher, by their school, and by the institution of American literature itself.

As James S. Leonard and Thomas Asa Tenney note in *Satire or Evasion?: Black Perspectives on 'Huckleberry Finn'*, "it goes without saying that the word was at the time of Twain's writing, and remains today, a slap in the face for black Americans. It is inevitable that black children in a classroom with whites should feel uncomfortable with a word and a book in which it appears so often, and that black parents should wish to protect their children from what the word represents" (5). And, as Arac notes with some dismay, the institution of American literary criticism, particularly in its public face in newspapers and magazines, is at least as much to blame as the original text. Reviews appearing in such mainstream organs as the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* have perpetuated a false impression of both the novel and the *N-word*, often to the detriment of concerned teachers, students, and parents, "who find themselves pained, offended, or frightened by the permission *Huckleberry Finn* gives to the circulation of an abusive term in the classroom and schoolyard" (Arac 30). Arac is referring in part to the long-standing critical usage of the name "Nigger Jim" to refer to the principal African American character in the novel. Astonishingly, given their apparently anti-racist positions and generally liberal political leanings, critics and writers such as Lionel Trilling, Leslie Fiedler, C. Vann Woodward, Perry Miller, Harold Beaver, and Norman Mailer (among scores of others), have had no compunction about employing this moniker *even though* the phrase never appears in the *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* at all. Let me repeat that: the phrase "Nigger Jim," used by critics and scholars and writers for over 70 years and presumably on the putative authority of Mark Twain himself, *never* appears in the novel. Not once.

The NewSouth Edition's attempt to ameliorate such problems in the text of *Huckleberry Finn*, while not wholly laudable, is therefore at least understandable and reasonable. Furthermore, it is certainly not the first attempt. The publishing house of Harper & Brothers released a 1931 edition, according to Robert B. Brown, "specially prepared to let 'Huck [...] step down from his place on the library shelf and enter the classroom'" (Brown 84). And ironically, the central complaint in a 1957 controversy in New York was that an edition of *Huckleberry Finn* did not capitalize the word "Negro," a word that does not actually appear in Twain's original text

(see Arac 63–66). Apparently, as with my own experience with *The Lord of the Flies* in the 1980s, the New York students were already getting an expurgated version, unbeknownst to them.

Still, although I think that its goals are praiseworthy in the main, I will not endorse the NewSouth Edition, since its means for achieving these goals are ham-fisted and sometimes outright stupid. Gribben has chosen to replace the *N-word* with the word "slave," which (astoundingly!) he claims is a "synonym," as if he cannot imagine an African American living in the antebellum era could be a free man, a surmise rather obviously overturned by the merest glance at the historical record. Indeed, Gribben seems to have temporarily forgotten that the most prominent African American character in *Huckleberry Finn* is himself a free man! Hence, we must grit out teeth through the nonsense of this famous (now-revised) line from the novel's denouement: "so, sure enough, Tom Sawyer had gone and took all that trouble and bother to set a free slave free!" (517). Slavery and racism in the United States are related, but quite distinct matters, and the *N-word* certainly did not go away after abolition, as Gribben knows all too well. Indeed, while Twain notoriously cautioned the illustrator of *Huckleberry Finn*, E.W. Kimble, not to make Huck look "too Irishy," Jim's looks had nothing whatsoever to do with his bondage or his freedom.

In fact, one could argue that Gribben's decision to conflate the historical condition of antebellum slavery with the seemingly perpetual problem of racism does *more* damage than the original, bigoted language of the novel was doing. Gribben cites a well-known moment in the text where Huck, disguised as Tom, lies to Sally Phelps, telling her that the steamboat "blowed out a cylinder-head," which leads to the following exchange:

"Good gracious! anybody hurt?"

"No'm. Killed a slave."

"Well, it's lucky; because sometimes people do get hurt" (453).<sup>5</sup>

Referring to this scene, Gribben explains that "the synonym 'slave' expresses the cultural racism that Twain sought to convey" (13). However, common sense alone suggests that Gribben is incorrect here. Were a "slave" to have been killed, then someone's valuable property would have been lost, and the tragedy of the accident, at least in the mind of Sally Phelps, presumably

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<sup>5</sup> Needless to say, in Twain's original, Huck says "No'm. Killed a nigger."

would be enhanced. By switching the terms, Gribben has lessened the power of any potential critique of racism that Twain (dubiously, in my view) may have had in mind. For example, Sacvan Bercovitch, pointing to the exact same spot in *Huckleberry Finn*, notes that Huck's use of the *N-word* is "profoundly racist" here. Observing the "full-stop" between Huck's "No'm" and "Killed a ...", Bercovitch writes: "We can't argue (as too many critics have) that it's just slang—a poor, ignorant boy's way of saying African American. What Huck *means* is far worse than what a bigot means by 'wop' or 'wasp.' Huck is saying that a 'nigger' is a *no one*, a nonhuman." Huck's use of the term here is also entirely gratuitous; "Huck could have just as well stopped at 'No'm.'" The term was a "vicious slur," in the 1880s as today—for Huck, for Twain, for contemporary readers, and for other readers up to the Civil Rights movement (see Bercovitch 106–108). No, the word "slave" is not, *in any way*, a synonym for the far more offensive and still incendiary word uttered more than 200 times in Twain's novel.

As is well known among even high school students, by the 1880s the question of abolition was settled, and slavery no longer had serious proponents or apologists, so Huck Finn's "decision" to "go to Hell" by electing not to return Jim to bondage was unlikely to be considered a controversial or even difficult choice by the contemporary reader. However, the bigoted view of a person referred to by the *N-word* as inferior to whites or even as not-wholly-human has persisted long after abolition, and this is the world in which the *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* circulates. Owing to the NewSouth Edition's flat-out foolishness in confusing race and slavery, I would not use this edition in a class, and I would advise against its use even in grade schools. But, in sum, it is not the NewSouth Edition's so-called "censorship" that makes the project objectionable, but the specific means chosen.

Twain's heirs in comedic and incisive satire have found ways to use the mechanisms of censorship to their advantage. I think that television satires, for instance, *The Daily Show* or *The Colbert Report*, are very much in the tradition of modern American humor that Twain helped to establish, and these shows routinely use those seven words that George Carlin taught us cannot be used on television. They "get away with it," as we know, by "bleeping" the words. The use of the bleep does not really erase the word entirely—that is, we all know what word is being bleeped—but the offensiveness is somehow mitigated. It would become very frustrating to have to hear that bleeping sound 200-plus times over the course of *Huckleberry Finn*, but it might still be preferable to the hundreds of instances of a word that even the fiercest defenders of the novel would hesitate to use in polite company, if at all.

The very existence of the silly term I have been using, the *N-word*, demonstrates the degree to which this is true. As Arac points out, the term *N-word* gained popular currency during the O.J. Simpson trial, when Deputy District Attorney Christopher Darden argued that admitting into evidence Detective Mark Fuhrman's use of "the filthiest, dirtiest, nastiest word in the English language" would "blind the jury" (citing Noble, A10). As Arac observes and then pointedly asks, "many broadcast media bleeped out Fuhrman's use of the term, and *USA Today* would not print the term even in their front-page story revealing the contents of the Fuhrman tapes. So I ask before going on: should people of goodwill unhesitatingly maintain that a word banned from CNN and *USA Today* must be required in the eighth-grade schoolroom?" (24).

Of course, I'm not really suggesting that a textual equivalent of the "bleep" should be inserted in place of the *N-word* in the *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, only that the sort of "censorship" we see in the NewSouth Edition is actually done all the time, with no real damage done to the original, to the reader, or to the institution of literature itself. Undoubtedly many bright youngsters can read the unexpurgated *Huckleberry Finn*, as well as *Moby-Dick*, *The Scarlet Letter*, and other great and complex books, just as they could watch great films like *Chinatown* or *Raging Bull*, but whether they should do so is another question, and whether all schoolchildren should be required to do so is a different matter entirely. Perhaps *Huckleberry Finn* does belong in college, as Lorrie Moore suggests, but if a PG or PG-13 version can be used in the high schools, so much the better. This is less a question of censorship than a question of how we wish for literature to function in culture and society more broadly. Are these texts to be worshipped as idols, which *Huckleberry Finn* has most certainly become for some, or can they become active participants in a vibrant, changing social milieu? My own terminology and phrasing give me away, of course, as I find the value of Twain's novel to lie not in our scrupulous attention to a boy's repetition of a naughty word but in the narrative's ability to help us imagine new and more interesting ways of seeing ourselves (white, black, and other) and the world we live in. Just because Huck himself wished to avoid being "sivilized" doesn't mean we or our students need to do so.

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