The Response of Black Readers to Mark Twain’s Adventures of Huckleberry Finn.

"All modern literature comes from one book by Mark Twain called Huckleberry Finn," wrote Ernest Hemingway in 1935. "It's the best book we've had." Although most literary critics and the general reading public would agree with Hemingway's assessment, the novel has also been the subject of much criticism and debate. The result has been a long history of staunch criticism and debate, first over what some white audiences viewed as its common vulgarity and, increasingly in this century, what many perceive as its racist and demeaning portrayal of black character. The result has been a response from Mark Twain’s Adventures of Huckleberry Finn that centers not only upon the work's language and characterization but upon its consequent value as literature, as well.

Thesis

Explain

Opening paragraph begins with a quotation:

"All modern literature comes from one book by Mark Twain called Huckleberry Finn," wrote Ernest Hemingway in 1935. "It's the best book we've had." Although most literary critics and the general reading public would agree with Hemingway's assessment, the novel has also been the subject of much criticism and debate. The result has been a long history of staunch criticism and debate, first over what some white audiences viewed as its common vulgarity and, increasingly in this century, what many perceive as its racist and demeaning portrayal of black character. The result has been an outpouring of critical responses to Mark Twain’s Adventures of Huckleberry Finn that centers not only upon the work's language and characterization but upon its consequent value as literature, as well.
The concerns of black audiences over language and characterization in Huckleberry Finn date back at least to 1896 with the outspoken criticism of Victoria Earle Matthews, the first national chairperson of the National Association of Colored Women. Addressing the Association that year, Matthews openly criticized "the Negro-hating Mark Twain" (Robinson 190) along with other white novelists whose works she felt misrepresented "people of African descent in the United States" (Matthews 170). She advocated a new "race literature," which would more positively portray people of color and eliminate "the traditional Negro in dialect, the subordinate, the servent" so familiar to readers of the day (173). Anticipating the resentment future generations would feel over Jim's characterization in Huckleberry Finn, Matthews further spoke against the stream of current literature portraying every black character as the representative "Darkey" (176).

Such criticism of Twain and other white novelists of the age identified what black readers today view as the central issues surrounding Huckleberry Finn—the demeaning portrayal of black character and dialect. Twain himself calls attention to the dialects of Huckleberry-Finn in the "explanatory" preface to the novel. Assuring readers that the possibly awkward-sounding speech of his characters is both authentic and intended, he explains that the book uses several different vernaculars, including "the Missouri Negro dialect" and others with which he has "personal familiarity" (2). The success of Twain's efforts to create characters through natural, realistic speech has been highly praised, with linguistic authorities of today vouching for the accuracy of the many regional dialects he presents. In fact, what critic Hamlin Hill and others have praised as the "liberation" of the vernacular voice in American literature (Twain xii) is something most critics agree constitutes the novel's technical and artistic greatness (cf. ibid, xxvii).

Despite such present-day praise, however, contemporary black readers and critics—like Victoria Earle Matthews, cited earlier—find Twain's thoroughness in presenting "the Missouri Negro
The author integrates quotation with her own sentence structures.

"I doan k'yer what de widder say, he wasn't no wise man, ather. He had som er de dad-retchedes' ways I ever see. Does you know 'bout dat chillie, dat he uz gwine to chop in two?" (111)

Such contrasting styles of speaking give Huck, Jim, and the novel's other characters distinctive identities, but they also emphasize racial differences among characters. Black writer Nick Aaron Ford feels that Jim's "inconsistent, exaggerated, comic dialect" in the novel reinforces the reader's belief in the inability of blacks "even to come close to mastering the language patterns of the dominant culture" (434). Another black writer, Charles H. Nichols, points out that Jim's "absurd dialectical speech" rob not only him but also other black characters in the novel of their dignity and separate identities as individuals ("A True Book" 15).

Nowhere, however, is the charge of insensitivity and linguistic racism in Huckleberry Finn more heatedly focused than upon the liberal use of the word nigger, spoken by Huck and others throughout the novel and appearing some 150-200 times or more. Black as well as white critics are divided on Twain's reason for using the term, as well as upon its overall effect upon readers. Some agree that the term was the common and most authentic word Twain could have used in Huckleberry Finn and that employing any other would have seriously jeopardized the book's integrity (Rule 17). It is clear from Twain's own writings that he consciously moved away from using the word in his later works and even before creating Huckleberry Finn (Petitt 91). That fact gives support to the view of several critics, black as well as white, that Twain may have been
using the word *nigger* ironically in the novel as a way of making white readers more self-conscious about it (Rule 17; Nichola "A True Book" 15).

In Twain's own time, *nigger* was already considered demeaning to blacks (Rule 17), and it seems clear that even Huck recognizes the word's negative senses, as when he talks about sampling and going to hell for helping a *nigger* rather than a *slave* or runaway. The term appears consistently in a variety of contexts whenever anyone mentions someone who is black. Jim, for instance, is introduced in Chapter 2 as "Miss Watson's big nigger, named Jim" (22); Huck tells us "you can't learn a nigger to argue" (114), and the doctor who treats Tom Sawyer assures others that Jim "ain't a bad nigger" (356). In one much debated exchange, Aunt Polly asks Huck if anyone got hurt when the cylinder head of the boat he was supposed to blow up. Huck answers, "No'm. Killed a nigger," to which she replies, "Well, it's-lucky; because sometimes people do get hurt" (280).

Black critics generally agree that in this scene, Huck is not speaking for his own view of black people but only attempting to make himself more successful, playing upon Aunt Sally's own "glit and conventional bigotry" (David Smith 5) in order to expose it to the reader. Charles H. Nichola, in fact, interprets the scene as carrying out Twain's purpose of satirizing "racist self-righteousness" throughout the novel ("Color" 41).

The difficulty black as well as white readers today have adjusting to Twain's use of *nigger* in the novel is matched by the general reaction to the characterization of Jim. Critics agree that Twain too often debases him at the hands of Huck and other white characters. Black critics especially feel that Jim may indeed be noble, but in addition to being demeaned through the book's language, he is also presented as the stereotypical "good nigger," ignorant and superstitious, a boy-man who "violates all our conception of adult maleness" (Nichola, "Color" 41). Black novelist Ralph Ellison views Jim even more harshly, describing him as no more than "a white man's inadequate portrait of a slave" (qtd. in Bell 13).
Examples of Twain’s portrayal of Jim as the stereotypical “Darker” denounced by Victoria Earle Matthews abound in the novel. When Huck tricks Jim into believing that he had only dreamed of losing Huck on the river (118-121) or when the duke dresses Jim in a King Lear gown and paints his face blue (203). The ultimate example of Jim’s debasement, of course, occurs in the final chapters, when Tom and Huck use Jim to carry out their game of freeing him from a castle. Scenes such as these are intended to be humorous, but both white and black critics agree that they succeed only by demeaning Jim (cf. Spiller 933; Nichols 410). Black readers, especially young ones, says Hank Aaron Ford, find such scenes especially disturbing:

It is embarrassing...to see a member of their race, fictional or real, become an object of fun and condescending laughter to members of the white majority. As is the case with Jim. In such a situation the [reader] identifies with Jim and thus suffers a painful loss of dignity and self-respect. (436)

Indeed, for black audiences generally, the potential value of reading Adventures of Huckleberry Finn as a work of significant literature continues to be seriously undermined by the novel’s seeming mockery of blacks and the insensitivity of whites to their feelings about the novel’s racist implications. Recalling her feelings when reading Adventures of Huckleberry Finn in a predominantly white school, for instance, Margot Allen describes her own reactions to the constant appearance of the term nigger as follows:

I need not tell you I hated the book! Yet, while we read it, I pretended that it didn't bother me. I hid from my teacher and my classmates, the tensions, discomfort and hurt I would feel every time I heard that word or watched the class laugh at Jim and felt some white youngster’s stare being directed my way. . . . ["Huck Finn: Two Generations" 9] As a result of her early experience with the book, Allen feels that there is a heavy cost to pay in reading Huckleberry
Finn. It is a cost, she says, "borne in large part by young Black students who may experience a complex range and mix of feelings from indifference to anger, from insult to humiliation" (12).

Despite such feelings by Allen and others, a majority of black and white readers defend not only the novel's being taught in school but also insist upon its value as great literature. Many view Twain's use of realistic racial epithets like nigger as having a positive, ironic effect upon the general reader's attitudes towards racism itself. Black writer David L. Smith feels Twain's use of the term nigger is "neither to offend nor merely to provide linguistic authenticity" (5). Rather, he says, Twain uses the term to establish "a context against which Jim's specific virtues may emerge as explicit refutations of racist presuppositions" (6). In Smith's opinion, Jim's humanity wins all readers over to seeing blacks as worthy human beings, so much so that applying the term nigger to Jim or anyone else seems wrong.

Such a view of the word's effectiveness in this way is echoed by the experience of Professor Jeanne Corderman, who has taught Adventures of Huckleberry Finn to black and white college students for several years. According to Professor Corderman, both black and white students react negatively to the novel's use of nigger, though for different reasons:

Black students seem to resent the term because they view it as echoing the racial prejudice they already see in our society. White students, on the other hand, grow into resenting the term because they learn though reading the novel how inhumanly Jim and other slaves are treated and how truly unjust a derogatory term like nigger is to them.

Professor Corderman points out that the term's use leaves both white and black students feeling ambiguous about the novel. Black as well as white students, she says, are torn: They condemn Huck for hesitating about saving Jim and later delaying his freedom, though they admire Huck as an individual and respect his struggle to break with the laws of his society (Corderman).
The response that readers of Huckleberry Finn have to Jim, in fact, underlies a good deal of the controversy surrounding the novel. For many, no strongly and positively is Jim's character represented that he "exceeds even Huck in fidelity and innate manliness, to emerge as the book's noblest character" (Spiller 932). Though black critics resent Jim's manipulation by Huck and other whites, many also view Twain's depiction of Jim's behavior as realistic for the times. Most see Jim's subservience, in fact, as a condition of prewar slavery (Doughty 57) or as a practical necessity for existing as a runaway (Barksdale 17). Despite his final criticism of Twain's portrayal of Jim, black writer Ralph Ellison also feels that, in a literary sense, Jim is a complex character "fitted into the outlines of the minstrel tradition," from which emerge his "dignity and human capacity" (qtd. in Bell 10). Black critic Bernard W. Bell states that it is "sad but true for many black readers that Twain's 'Nigger' Jim is the best-eximple of the humanity of black American slaves" that nineteenth-century white American fiction can offer (17).

The complicated, sometimes conflicting attitudes of blacks toward Jim's character and the novel's language have challenged the novel's position as a classic to be taught in public schools. Most black readers agree that the book should be taught but also argue that it is more suitable for older readers of high school and college age (Allen 12; Chambers 13) and that teachers need more sensitive training and preparation whenever they teach the novel (Nichols 434-36). Michael Meyers, assistant director of the National Association of Colored People (NAACP), says, "Our position is that you don't ban Huckle Finn; you explain Huckle Finn ("On Huck" 3).

The majority of black readers today would agree that, properly taught and understood, Mark Twain's Adventures of Huckleberry Finn can serve as what black writer Charles H. Nichols calls an "indispensable part of the education of both black and white youth" ("A True Book" 14). Certainly, Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn has come a long way from being what made it the "veriest of trash" for white audiences in the nineteenth century. Today, the book acts for black
as well as white readers as what another
black writer, David L. Smith, calls a
"trigger to outrage" (5), a classic work
of art that stirs reflection and humanity
in all of us. In this sense, Adventures
of Huckleberry Finn is perhaps after all
just what Ernest Hemingway insisted, "The
best book we've had."

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