

The Misreading of Literature Context, Would-Be Censors, and Critics

by Michelle Marder Kamhi

The curse word's in this book is not fit for kid's to read. If this is all the book's you have, heaven help us. . . . I never let my kid's hear these word's around my house. Why should they read them in your book's? . . . Your book is not fit to even talk about. . . .

So writes an irate parent to his son's seventh-grade English teacher in a small Ohio town. The book the parent would censor is *A Day No Pigs Would Die* by Robert Newton Peck. Aptly described by one reviewer as a "superbly rich and moving novel about boyhood, becoming a man, and love," it is the poignant and beautifully told story of Peck's own coming of age on a Vermont farm.

From the point of view of junior high school English teachers, especially those in rural America, *A Day No Pigs Would Die* seems virtually made to order for their students. In language simple enough to be accessible even to slower readers but powerful enough to satisfy discriminating adults, Peck's autobiographical work combines all the elements of good fiction: a well-constructed plot; interesting, believable characters; a worthy theme; and a prose style finely tuned to the spirit of the narrative. Moreover, *A Day No Pigs Would Die* is in every respect (its curse words notwithstanding) a highly moral story, celebrating time-honored American values: respect for moral order and productive work; family solidarity; individual courage, independence, and integrity. Ironically, the angry parent who appears so threatened by the book might have been reassured by its message, if only he could have perceived it. For the book powerfully affirms (to borrow the words of another, more approving parent) "the value of a man as a man, regardless of education, wealth, or social status."

If the angry father's peremptory misreading of the book were an isolated case, it might not be worth discussing. It is, however, as beleaguered English teachers and librarians in this country well know, all too common. And what it reveals about the poverty of our general culture goes far beyond any indictment the parent's errors of grammar and punctuation might prompt with respect to the American educational system's failure to teach basic skills.

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In dismissing Peck's fundamentally moral book as immoral simply because it contains curse words, the irate father, like countless other would-be censors in America, past and present, has demonstrated a failure in overall comprehension of the text. Such individuals erroneously take isolated verbal signposts to denote the work's entire meaning. They are not wholly *illiterate*, in the strictest sense of the word, for they can read. But neither are they truly *literate*, in the fullest sense of the word, for they do not know how to read literature. In the most extreme cases, not infrequent, they do not even bother to read the entire work they would ban. The interpretive, evaluative context such would-be censors bring to bear is limited to their own personal life experience and value system. Not understanding that the author's meaning is to be discovered in *his* context, not their own, these "aliterate" readers disregard the relation of each passage to the literary work as a whole, to the context created by the writer. Thus the rich realm of expression constituted by creative writing essentially eludes them, because at its best it communicates indirectly—by suggestion and implication (both of which are highly dependent on the imaginary or fictional context)—rather than directly, literally, and explicitly.

The Catcher in the Rye

A contemporary classic frequently and blatantly misread by would-be censors is J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*—the "most censored item" in U.S. educational institutions from 1966 through 1975, according to one survey. Even now, more than forty years after its publication, the novel is still under fire. And the attempts of four decades of outraged parents to ban the book from classrooms and school libraries typify challenges to literature in the school curriculum. One school board (in Issaquah, Washington), for example, voted to remove *The Catcher in the Rye* from a high school reading list because the book was "full of profanities" and they judged it to be "anti-religious." Characteristically, the objections to the Salinger novel (as to much other contemporary fiction in public schools and libraries) focus on language taken out of context. "When a book has 222 'hells,' 27 'Chrissakes,' seven 'hornys,' . . . then it shouldn't be in our public schools," argued the local citizen who spearheaded the Issaquah ban.

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To such literal readers, protagonist Holden Caulfield's notorious lament "If you had a million years to do it in, you couldn't rub out even *half* the 'Fuck you' signs in the world," is like a red cloth waved before a bull. Aliterate readers cannot see beyond, or *through*, the "F word" to grasp the full meaning of Holden's protest. His statement (undoubtedly the most challenged of the book's many "objectionable" passages), far from being obscene in its intent, is a plea *against obscenity*. What Salinger is telling us, implicitly, is that Holden desperately wants to *obliterate* obscenity from his world.

Why is Holden's narrative—in essence a cry for decency, sincerity, and love in what he sees as an obscene, hypocritical, and uncaring world—so often rejected on grounds of obscenity and profanity merely because it employs obscene and profane language? Because too many Americans, even among the "educated," have not learned how language and form in literature function to convey more than literal meaning, how the profoundest levels of meaning of a literary work relate to the work's form, style, and specific language.

Huckleberry Finn

In perhaps no other work of American fiction is the author's choice of language more essential to the heart of his meaning than in Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. And the troubles that book has had since it appeared a century ago attest to the persistent and pervasive aliteracy in American culture.

Soon after its publication, *Huckleberry Finn* was banned from the shelves of the Concord (Massachusetts) Public Library by the library's trustees. Objecting not only to the book's subject matter ("adventures of a very low grade of morality") but also to its idiom ("a rough dialect. . . systematic use of bad grammar and . . . coarse, inelegant expressions") and its style ("flippant and irreverent"), the trustees summarily rejected the book as "trash of the veriest sort," according to the report in a Boston newspaper of the day.

What the Concord trustees (much like the would-be censors of *A Day No Pigs Would Die* and *The Catcher in the Rye* in our own day) overlooked was that beneath the narrative vulgarities and irreverence of *Huckleberry Finn* is a profound concern for authentic moral values. As Twain succinctly characterized his book a decade later, it is a story in which "a sound heart and a deformed conscience come into collision and conscience suffers defeat." By "a deformed conscience" Twain meant the often cruel, hypocritical, social and moral conventions of the society depicted; "a sound heart" refers to Huck's innate good sense, which prompts him to override those conventions. Early in the narrative (ch. 3), for instance, Huck rejects, on his own typically sensible grounds, the con-

ventional ethic preached by the widow Douglas:

She told me . . . I must do everything I could for other people, and look out for them all the time, and never think about myself. . . . But I couldn't see no advantage about it—except for the other people—so at last I reckoned I wouldn't worry about it any more, but just let it go.

Sidestepping the widow's exhortations to altruism (apparently because it seems quite natural to him that his first duty be to himself) does not prevent Huck from feeling, and acting on, a deep concern for others, however, when the individual's virtues and his own sense of justice warrant it. Indeed, he later risks both his skin and, he believes, eternal damnation as well, to save the runaway slave Jim, who has become his friend. At the moment when the "deformed conscience" of a bigoted society prompts Huck to save his soul by writing a letter betraying Jim, Huck's "sound heart" proves a better moral guide. Recalling the many times Jim has been a generous, loyal, and loving friend, Huck confides to the reader: "I couldn't seem to strike no places to harden me against him." Tearing up the fatal letter he has written, he resolves, in what has been taken as the dramatic climax of this loosely constructed novel: "All right then, I'll go to hell" (ch. 31)—a statement meant more literally than figuratively.

Modern Misreadings

While being banned in Concord hardly deterred the boy with a sound heart from winning the affection of millions of readers around the world—and his story is widely acknowledged to be a masterpiece of American and world literature (albeit an "unruly" and "lopsided" masterpiece, as one critic has described it)—*Huckleberry Finn* still falls victim to frequent misinterpretation. A close look at some of the many contemporary misreadings of the novel by the general public, academics, and professional critics alike can shed light both on the meaning of this unorthodox American classic and on the pitfalls common in the interpretation of literature generally.

Once deemed offensive primarily by, and to, "genteel" society, *Huckleberry Finn* is now perceived by many educators, writers, and parents as insulting to blacks and, by some feminist-minded critics, to women as well. As summarized in an editorial in the *Bulletin of the Council on Interracial Books for Children* (a private agency devoted to counteracting bias in children's books), the principal objection is that the novel "attacks the condition of being Black." More specifically, there is concern "that Jim is an embarrassing and negative role model for Black children and a source of racist amusement for white readers." Thus the CIBC devoted a double issue (Vol. 15 [1984], Nos. 1 & 2) of its bimonthly *Bulletin* to the question of how (and when) *Huckleberry Finn* should be

taught, focusing on how the problem of racism should be addressed. As though the novel's alleged racism were not trouble enough, in that same issue a feminist historian further charged that the book reveals Twain's "profound misogyny."

While there is not space here to examine in detail all the spurious arguments marshaled against *Huckleberry Finn*, a few examples will illustrate how the short-sighted focus on single issues—a focus blind to the relevance of literary and historical context—can result in an egregious misreading of literature, even by those who surely ought to know better.

Twain's alleged antifeminism is most easily disposed of. Critics who see misogyny in *Huckleberry Finn* commonly mistake a few of the novel's female characters to be representative of the author's view of women in general. (The feminist historian writing in the CIBC *Bulletin*, for instance, sees Miss Watson and Aunt Sally as Twain's "prototypes of the narrow, mean, anti-sexual, anti-freedom, anti-human female.") Huck's different responses to the various female characters in the novel belie this kind of generalized interpretation, however.

Huck clearly distinguishes between Miss Watson and the widow Douglas, for example, even as they are both trying to reform him. Recalling the aftermath of an adventure with Tom Sawyer, from which he returned "all greased up and clayey," Huck relates (ch. 3):

I got a good going-over in the morning, from old Miss Watson, on account of my clothes; but the widow she didn't scold, but only cleaned off the grease and clay and looked so sorry that I thought I would behave a while if I could.

He then tells how the widow would talk to him about Providence "in a way to make a body's mouth water" but then Miss Watson would "knock it all down again." He concludes

that there was two Providences, and a poor chap would stand considerable show with the widow's Providence, but if Miss Watson's got him there warn't no help for him any more.

Miss Watson is indeed depicted as a cold, controlling, punishing woman—who would not deserve Huck's (or anyone's) affection. The widow Douglas, on the other hand, is so kind and loving toward Huck that, despite his discomfort with her efforts to "civilize" him, he is moved to "behave a while" if he can and would even like, he subsequently adds, to "belong to" her Providence.

In a later episode (ch. 28), Huck is so filled with admiration for another of the novel's females—Mary Jane Wilks ("she had more sand in her than any girl I ever see")—that he risks his own safety to help her recover her inheritance. Huck's action here not only further controverts the

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charge of Twain's misogyny but emphatically gives the lie to another, more common misreading of the novel—i.e., that Huck personifies and glorifies total irresponsibility (a notion as popular among the novel's admirers as among its detractors). Huck actually behaves very responsibly, toward people he cares about—people like Mary Wilks and Jim. It is simply that his sense of responsibility springs more urgently from his own personal needs, values, and affections than from the dictates of society.

Too many Americans, even among the "educated," have not learned how the profoundest levels of meaning of a literary work relate to the work's form, style, and specific language.

The Right Words

What, then, of the alleged racism in the novel? Such charges (like those against *A Day No Pigs Would Die* and *The Catcher in the Rye*) focus largely on questions of language. The frequent use of the pejorative term "nigger" is seen as particularly offensive. Significantly, those who interpret this use as evidence of Twain's own "racism," rather than as reflecting attitudes and assumptions of his fictional characters, generally fail to mention that he used the less deprecating terms "negro" and "colored" in other contexts. More important, they fail to acknowledge that, deprecating epithets aside, Twain depicts the novel's principal black character, Jim, as more admirable than most of the minor white characters who populate the book (a motley crew of "swindlers, drunkards, hypocrites, lunkheads, fools, rapscallions, deadbeats, bounty hunters, and trigger-happy psychopaths," in the words of Twain scholar Justin Kaplan), and even as morally superior to Huck himself (see esp. ch. 15).

Objections to the racist language in *Huckleberry Finn* have included criticism of the "exaggerated dialect" spoken by Jim. An article in the CIBC Bulletin argues, for example, that Twain based this "mock Black 'dialect'" on minstrelsy traditions of caricature and ridicule (rather than on direct observation of the actual black speech of the day), and cites, as partial evidence for the argument, a seemingly deprecatory letter Twain wrote in 1874, when he was working on *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*—a decade in time and light years in artistic and personal development before the completion of *Huckleberry Finn*. This fallacious argument exemplifies two common pitfalls of literary interpretation: first, the tendency to see an author's work and thought as monolithically uniform (an

especially insidious fallacy, denying as it does the possibility of individual growth and change); and second, the inappropriate use of external historical evidence to interpret a literary text (such external evidence is relevant only if it is consistent with the internal evidence of the text).

To understand the use of language in *Huckleberry Finn*, one might begin with what Twain himself said in his explanatory note (preceding ch. 1), in which he points to seven distinct varieties of dialect used in the book (among them, "the Missouri negro dialect"). "The shadings have not been done in a haphazard fashion," he emphasizes, "but pains-

takingly, and with the trustworthy guidance and support of personal familiarity." Twain's claim to have given special attention to the matter of idiom is corroborated by comparison of the published text of *Huckleberry Finn* with extant manuscript pages. Thousands of changes in spelling and diction were made—presumably to improve the accuracy of transcription, or at the very least to enhance the *illusion* of accuracy. What ultimately "counts for literature," as Twain scholar Henry Nash Smith has observed, is this *illusion* of accuracy, and how it functions in the novel.

The full force and function of the black dialect in *Huckleberry Finn* can be demonstrated by comparison with dialogue like the following from *Tom Sawyer* (in which Aunt Polly's "small colored boy," Jim—no relation to the Jim in *Huckleberry Finn*—is responding to Tom's offer to fetch water in return for whitewashing the fence):

"Can't, Tom. Ole missis, she told me I got to go and git this water and not stop foolin' roun' wid anybody. She says she spec' Tom goin' to ask me to whitewash, and so she told me go 'long and 'tend to my own business—she 'lowed she'd 'tend to the whitewashin'." (ch. 2)

In *Huckleberry Finn*, the diction of "Miss Watson's big nigger, named Jim" obviously deviates much further from standard speech—as shown in Jim's account of his escape from Miss Watson's:

"I'd made up my mine 'bout what I's agwyne to do. You see ef I kep' on tryin' to git away afoot, de dogs 'ud track me; ef I stole a skift to cross over, dey'd miss dat skift, you see, en dey'd know 'bout whah I'd lan' on de yuther side en whah to pick up my

track. So I says, a raff is what I's arter; it doan' make no track." (ch. 8)

Even if (as has been charged) Jim's dialect were nothing more than a caricature by Twain of actual black speech—a caricature conforming to white readers' notions of blacks as stupid and ignorant—what is significant here is the content of that speech. That is, in reasoning through a safe route of escape, Jim shows very good sense. Similarly, in the comic *Polly-voofranzy* debate between Huck and Jim in chapter 15, though the dialogue mimics deprecatory minstrel show banter, Jim's argument is, in fact, logically sounder than Huck's. Thus Twain clearly implies that there is much more to the "nigger" than his "ignorant" manner of speaking suggests. In these instances, as elsewhere in the novel, the author subtly debunks racist assumptions, as David L. Smith has persuasively argued in an article in the *Mark Twain Journal* (fall 1984).

Objections to the racist terms and substandard negro speech in *Huckleberry Finn* bear a definite kinship to the objections formerly raised against the work's "coarse" expressions, "irreverent" style, and "systematic use of bad grammar." Both varieties of criticism are oblivious to the author's literary purpose. Twain's use of substandard (and sometimes racist) speech in *Huckleberry Finn*—not only in the dialogue portions but, more radically, in Huck's first-person narrative—was the very deliberate choice of a seasoned writer, enabling him to achieve an authenticity and intimacy not otherwise possible. "If I tell a boy's story," he once wrote,

it is never worth printing; it comes from the head not the heart. . . . [For it] to be successful and worth printing, the imagined boy would have to tell his story *himself* and let me act merely as his amanuensis.

For Huck Finn, fourteen-year-old son of the town drunkard, to "tell his story himself," meant that Twain as "amanuensis" had to suspend the author's customary standards of grammar, spelling, and refined usage.

Again, comparison with *Tom Sawyer* is illuminating. The content of several passages in the two novels is so similar that Twain seems to have deliberately reworked the old material, transforming the earlier work's conventional third-person narrative through Huck's boyish vernacular. The transformation is most striking in the long descriptions of dawn in chapter 14 of *Tom Sawyer* and chapter 19 of *Huckleberry Finn*, as even brief excerpts will show. In *Tom Sawyer*, we see the professional author's carefully wrought, rather formal description:

It was the cool gray dawn, and there was a delicious sense of repose and peace in the deep pervading calm and silence of the woods. Not a leaf stirred; not a sound obtruded upon great Nature's meditation. . . .

In *Huckleberry Finn*, we find the spontaneous but expressive narrative of an observant, if uncultivated, fourteen-year-old:

Not a sound, anywheres—perfectly still—just like the whole world was asleep, only sometimes the bull-frogs a cluttering, maybe.

As a master of the literary craft, Twain was intensely concerned with using the language appropriate to his subject. “The difference between the almost right word and the right word,” he once noted, is “the difference between the lightning-bug and the lightning.” What critics and teachers need to emphasize to those questioning Twain’s use of racist language is that, in the context of *Huckleberry Finn*, the right words are those which are true to the novel’s characters and setting. Huck and Jim should sound like a poor white boy and a fugitive slave in the slaveholding society of the Mississippi valley before the Civil War—not like actors in a Pepperidge Farm commercial (to borrow one reviewer’s image of the dreadfully false adaptation of the novel perpetrated on public television earlier this year).

Problems of Plot and Historical Context

Readers who charge that *Huckleberry Finn* condones racist attitudes frequently cite the final chapters of the novel, in which Tom Sawyer unexpectedly reappears (by the most improbable coincidence) and dominates the action, orchestrating a wildly romantic scheme to “free” Jim (who, Tom knows, has already been freed by Miss Watson on her deathbed). In these closing chapters, Huck is reduced to a mere sidekick of Tom; and Jim, retaining

with Marx and regard the final chapters as a bit of farce tacked on by Twain for the fun of it.

Knowledge of the author’s immediate historical context suggests otherwise, however. Twain completed *Huckleberry Finn* during the decade immediately following Reconstruction, and there is both internal and external evidence for viewing these troubling chapters as an extended metaphor for the multiple injustices and indignities white Southerners visited on “free” blacks during this period. In the final pages of *Huckleberry Finn*, then, Tom Sawyer is no longer to be seen simply as the charming boy of the novel Twain had written a decade earlier, but as a youthful equivalent of the Southern gentleman, steeped in the romantic tradition of writers like Sir Walter Scott (whom Twain despised)—the sort of Southerner who took control after Reconstruction and proceeded to exploit blacks as cruelly as under slavery. Huck, as “poor white trash,” is a mere accessory to the process, with little will or power of his own. Twain is not condoning the process, but satirizing it—not only to represent the cruelty of the post-Reconstruction period but to indicate the hollowness and destructiveness of the South’s romantic pretensions (a phenomenon which concerned Twain fully as much as racism—just one among the many varieties of man’s cruelty, folly, and inhumanity he abhorred).

Huck’s True Character

The essence of *Huckleberry Finn* is to be found ultimately not in plot but in the characterization of Huck—who is, regrettably, as misunderstood by his defenders

“he had an uncommon level head, for a nigger” (ch. 14). And later in the same chapter, he can also remark, to save face after Jim has stumped him in the *Polly-voo-franzky* debate: “I see it warn’t no use wasting words—you can’t learn a nigger to argue. So I quit.”

Bias hunters pounce on statements like these as proof positive of Huck’s (and Twain’s) racism, while some admirers, uneasy with Huck’s mouthing of a typical bigot’s clichés, would like to believe Huck really doesn’t mean them the way they sound. Both views are wrong. Huck does mean it, yet he is *not* a racist in the full sense of the word—because accepting racist clichés does not prevent him from seeing and responding to Jim as a human being of worth and dignity.

Like many a sensitive child, Huck is a perceptive observer and an astute judge of human character. But he is intellectually immature, and rarely moves from his sound specific observations to form abstractions and generalizations of his own or to question the received “wisdom” of society. It is precisely in the discrepancy between Huck’s authentic personal responses to specific characters and incidents, on one hand, and his naive parroting of conventional wisdom, morality, and racist notions, on the other, that the novel’s powerful irony and much of its irresistible humor lie. If readers miss this irony, they are apt to turn the author’s real meaning upside down (good reason to defer the required reading of *Huckleberry Finn* to senior high school or later, when students are mature enough to grasp its latent meaning). Though Huck never questions the institution of slavery, or the racist assumptions which buttressed it, we as readers cannot fail to do so if we are attentive to the details of his story.

Huckleberry Finn is not the perfect novel. But it has genius and a fundamentally “sound heart.” In spite of its imperfections, it is, as Henry Nash Smith has written, “a great book, not only because it worked a revolution in American literary prose, but because of what it says—against stupid conformity and for the autonomy of the individual.”

Innocent Victims

In exchanging authorial omniscience for the sometimes naive, sometimes crude, but always honest vision of a maverick adolescent, Twain gave life to a long progeny of juvenile narrators/protagonists. Rob Peck of *A Day No Pigs Would Die* and Holden Caulfield of *The Catcher in the Rye* are themselves members of that lineage. Like *Huckleberry Finn*, these fictional adolescents’ candid narratives, with the authors acting in the guise of a mere “amanuensis,” enable us to see the world with fresh eyes, unclouded by social convention and hypocrisy. But we can perceive the world anew through them only if we are not blinded by our own aliteracy.

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but a vestige of his earlier character, is callously exploited as the object of Tom’s “adventure.”

Even some of the novel’s most ardent fans have found these chapters trivial in tone and shallow in content—a feeble anticlimax to the powerful central portion of the narrative, with its sensitive portrayal of Huck and Jim and its insightful satire of small-town life along the river. To take the later chapters seriously, Twain scholar Leo Marx has argued, is to take lightly all that came before. Moreover, given the generally deficient plot of the novel (purists may question whether a series of episodes so casually strung together—united only by their narrator/protagonist, Huck, who undergoes no clear development in the course of the action—even deserves to be termed a novel), one is tempted to agree

as by his critics. Education columnist Fred M. Hechinger, for example, deploring attacks on the book for its alleged racism, commented in the *New York Times* last year that Huck helps Jim escape “because he knows that making a slave of him or of any human being is wrong.” Huck, in fact, knows no such thing, and to claim that he does is to detract immeasurably from the power of Twain’s fictional creation.

Though Huck risks his neck to aid Jim’s flight to freedom, he never actually questions the institution of slavery. (On the contrary, when he resolves to “go to hell” rather than betray Jim, he truly believes he is “taking up wickedness again.”) Nor does Huck question the racist assumptions on which slavery rests. So he can say of Jim at one moment: “He was right; he was nearly always right” and in the same breath add:

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There is something especially disturbing about witnessing the misreading of such books—like seeing innocents misunderstood or, worse, accused of crimes they didn't commit. . . . Saddening to think that parents would, and enraging to think that educators could, out of ignorance or misguided zeal, teach children to regard such books not as the true friends they are but as foes. A

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"Books Our Children Read"— Documentary Film

In addition to writing and speaking on the censorship issue, Michelle Kamhi conceived, produced, and directed a half-hour documentary film entitled "Books Our Children Read." The film, which was a finalist in the 1985 American Film Festival, explores how teachers and parents in one middle-American community (the Fort Frye Local School District in southeastern Ohio) constructively resolved their potentially explosive conflict over the books adolescents would read.

"Books Our Children Read" (28 min., color, 16mm and 1/2" or 3/4" video), with accompanying study guide, is available for sale or rental through Films Incorporated (800-323-4222).