

Twain and Racism

The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, by Mark Twain, is an excellent example of racism in literature, because it uses language describing African Americans which goes beyond satire. It treats them as objects and perpetuates stereotypes. It does not expose and deal with racism, as many advocates of its reading claim, but encourages an attitude of superiority that is unnecessary and intolerable. In order to rid ourselves from this racism, African American literature should be read more often in classrooms throughout the United States. Anything less will simply perpetuate racism.

The American Heritage Dictionary defines racism as "the belief that some races are inherently better than others." Mark Twain holds this belief, and his writing illustrates it. The use of the word "nigger" does not merely serve as a point of satire. He is not simply ridiculing the times by using it, but saying, "this is how it is." He conveys the idea that whites are superior to blacks in different ways. While he might criticize white people's actions, he never lumps them together, attributing similar characteristics to all of them by the use of a term like "nigger." By doing this, he is also offending about 15% of the United States population. Every character in the book is racist, even Huckleberry himself. With such lines as: "Here was this nigger, which I had as good as helped run away, coming right out flatfooted and saying he would steal his children-children that belonged to a man I didn't even know; a man that hadn't ever done me no harm"(Twain, P133), he illustrates this.

Additionally, the character of Jim is not a well-developed character like Huckleberry or even Aunt Sally, but is flat, and is never the instigator of actions. Instead, he is acted upon and is often the center of attention, treated as a problem throughout the book. When he breaks this pattern, and takes action, his image is not helped. Even when he tries to help Tom near the end, he is not shown as a human being, but at best a noble savage who acts without reason.

Finally, Jim's character is a stereotype. He is a black man trying to find a new home, and buy back his family. He believes in a wealth of superstitions and religious taboos which the white reader often laughs at. He has no desire to pursue academics, nor any concerns of finding a real job. This image, forwarded by Twain without any indication that he disagrees with it, clearly illustrates racial superiority. The whites in the story might be bad, but they are not ever grouped together, or called by such a painful term as "niggers."

Using the term "nigger" has no healing effect, especially not among white readers. Most shrug and say "Yeah, I guess that's offensive, but I don't mind it, it's part of the times." Surely they would not say the same if they were African Americans. Whites cannot possibly understand the anguish this causes, possibly with the exception of frequent Anti-Semitism which must be endured by many Jewish children. We just don't care, and do not see why others should. We are unable to place ourselves in the position of the oppressed, and feel their very real pain. Until we can, this book will be of no help to us.

"The greatest obstacle to reform is the white moderate," Martin Luther King Jr. once wrote. Reading their writing and pretending that it is not in some way racist by its nature, is absurd. It belittles African Americans and other minorities, and treats them as objects. It does not heal them, it only serves as a symbolic action

for bigger problems we are afraid to address. We must change our perspective on things. This means not making Huckleberry Finn (which does all of these things) mandatory curriculum, rather optional reading on spare time. As well as this, we must consult other cultures not walk all over them.
