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History's Turning Points (11) – *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn – II*

Lead: Historical study reveals twists in the human journey. Consider the continuing controversy over *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.

Intro: *A Moment in Time* with Dan Roberts.

Content: The publication of *Huckleberry Finn* was greeted with howls of derision by readers and institutions accustomed to the Romantic style of narrative. The author, Mark Twain, was a devotee of

literary Realism, a movement within American and European literature that emerged after the Civil War and extended into the twentieth century. It may be defined as “the faithful representation of reality.” Authors such as William James, Rebecca Harding Davis, and Twain attempted in their writings to describe the lives and language of their characters as they really were. By the middle of the twentieth *Huckleberry Finn* was being hailed as a milestone in American literary progress.

Yet, any fair reading of *Finn* reveals the bawdiness of Twain’s narrative in which racist, denigrating descriptions of African-Americans, Jim in particular, were fully consistent

with the stereotypical view of blacks held by most whites before and after the Civil War. Though he was a realist, he was no moral, politically correct crusader. Twain was a literary entrepreneur trying to sell books. His description of African-Americans was fully consistent with the expectations of his readers and most whites in this period were racists. If Huck had been a real person he would have used the n-word just as liberally. That was reality, the way he was brought up.

Some scholars and educators have attempted to ban the book from schools or change the language of the novel to clean it up of obviously offensive language such as the n-word, but other scholars warn that this is an

ahistorical cleansing. History is not the clever anticipation by ancients of modern social sensibilities. The story of the past is a human enterprise filled with flawed human beings doing and thinking terrible things and other human beings doing extraordinarily moral and salutary things, appearing to be quite modern in their insights. Why not use Twain's pretty accurate description of his character's flaws to further the discussion of race in schools and colleges and public policy fora as a way of describing just how far society has come on the issue of race and how far it needs to go?

At the University of Richmond's School of Professional and Continuing Studies, I'm Dan Roberts.

Resources

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