Racism In Huck Finn Essay, Research Paper

Racism in Huck Finn

Ever since it was written, Mark Twain?s Huckleberry Finn has been a novel

that many people have found disturbing. Although some argue that the novel is

extremely racist, careful reading will prove just the opposite. In recent years

especially, there has been an increasing debate over what some will call the

racist ideas in the novel. In some cases the novel has even been banned by

public school systems and censored by public libraries. The basis for the debate

is how Jim, a black slave and one of the main characters, is depicted. However,

if one was to look at the underlying themes in the novel, they would realize that

it is not racist and could even be considered an anti ? slavery novel.

The most popular problem people have with this book is the use of the word

?nigger?. It must be remebered that during this time period it was not considered

much of an insullt. You can also notice in the book it was not meant offensively by

Huck, or taken offensively by Jim. This is what Stephan Shepard had to say about the

banning of the book and the use of the word ?nigger?:

In addition to removing Mark Twain’s novel from the

required reading list, the district decided to use a

censored version of the novel on its optional list.

Admittedly, the censorship is minor the infamous

“n-word” is deleted throughout the novel ? however,

it is not only a dishonest alteration of Twain’s craft, it

is also an unfair attempt to enforce the tastes of a few

upon all students in the district. (Shepard 1)

Also a column in The New York Times pointed out, “Huckleberry Finn is in constant

trouble with teachers, librarians and parents because of its iterations of ?nigger?, a

word that has a preemptive force today that it did not have in Huck Finn’s Mississippi

Valley of the 1840s” (Ritter 2).

Another aspect of the novel that some consider racist is the description of

Jim. The first time the reader meets Jim, a very negative description is given. It

is said that Jim is illiterate, childlike, not very bright and extremely superstitious.

However, it is important not to lose sight of who is giving this description.

Although Huck is not exactly a racist child, he has been raised by extremely

racist individuals and has had certain ideas about blacks put in his head. Also,

sad as it is, this description was probably pretty accurate for the time period.

Millions of slaves in the South were not permitted any formal education, were

not allowed any independent thought and were constantly abused. Twain is

portraying a very realistic slave raised in the South during this time period, and to

say that he is racist because of his historical accuracy is ridiculous. Casting

judgment upon him and calling him racist is not only unfair, but also

pointless. The values of Twain?s time were different than the values of today.

The very existence of slavery proves this. Twain has no obligation to live up to

today?s morals or ethical values, and cannot be expected to because they did not

exist when he was alive. Therefore, the present-day objections to Huckleberry

Finn are ridiculous. It is stupidity to go back and apply standards that are

predominate today, to novels written more than a hundred years ago (Baldanza

2). Also, it is important to remember in Chapter 15, the reader is told of an

incident which contradicts the original childlike description of Jim. In fact, the

reader is presented with a very caring and father ? like individual who becomes

very worried when he loses Huck in the fog (Twain 134). This is in order to

point out the connection made between Huck and Jim. A connection that is made

between two people, not a person and a piece of property.

There are many points in the novel were Huck voices extreme opposition

to the slave trade and racism. In chapter six, Huck?s father intensely objects to

the government granting suffrage to an educated black professor. Twain wants

the reader to see the foolishness of this statement. Huck?s father believes that

he is superior to this black professor simply because of the color of his skin

(Twain 69). Huck oppeses this statement made by his father and does not

understand. Twain wants the reader to see the foolishness of this notion.

Another example of Huck?s opposition to slavery is when Huck first meets Jim he

makes a conscious decision not to turn him in. Later in the story, Huck is

not able to understand why this man who has become one of his only friends

should be a slave. Through this, Twain expresses opinions of the absurdity of

slavery and importance of following ones personal conscious before the rules of

society. Remember that the novel is set in the South. Blacks were slaves with no legal

rights werefaced with high degrees of discrimination. Their status is lower than that of a

white person, and Huck grows up debating that reality. It is a barrier at first

between himself and Jim, which they eventually realize and overcome. By the

end of the novel, Huck and the reader have come to understand that Jim is not

someone?s property but an equal.

Another argument that has come up in this debate is how Twain gives Jim

an accent and uses many misspellings in his dialogue. An example of this is

when Jim says ?Drot your pore broken heart… what are you heaving your pore

broken heart at us f?r? We haint done nothing? (Twain 124). The use of an

occasional apostrophe and misspelling increases the level of detail in the novel,

it adds an element to the feeling of the characters, not a racist undertone.

If Mark Twian was such a racist, why would he constantly make the black

man look better than all of the whites? Quite visibly, Jim acts better than all of

the white characters in the book. Jim is loyal to Huck, he goes along with him

and protects him to the best of his ability. He also has a very clear plan, and

that is to go to Cairo, escape to a free state and make enough money to buy his

family or have the Underground Railroad free them (Fischkin 3). His loyalties are to

his family and friends. You can compare him to Huck, who is a good guy but

even he is running away from society and being a rebel. Other white characters

include the King and the Duke who exploit, cheat, and steal from anyone they

can find, having no morals whatsoever. Sheapardson, who is white, murders a

man in cold blood. Whites together in the book generally signify a lynch mob of

sorts. Other examples, such as the orphans, are so thoughtless that they

practically give away their money to their exploiters (Conn 1). Twain paints a sad

image of the morals of most white characters in the story. The actions of the

characters point to things being wrong with society, not to point a finger at

blacks. Because Jim lives, as the Times column pointed out, “on a higher ethical

level than anybody else in this book including Huck. He is a hero in the novel

but not enough of a noble hero to be considered politically correct in today’s

society? (Times 6). In fact, many people have noticed this about the novel:

Twain is using this casual dialogue ironically, as a

was to underscore the chilling truth about the old

south, that it was a society where perfectly “nice”

people didn’t consider the death of a black person

worth their notice. Because of his upbringing, the boy

starts out that slavery is part of the natural order; but

as the story unfolds he wrestles with his conscience,

and when the crucial moment comes he decides he will

be damned to the flames of hell rather than betray his

black friend. And Jim, as Twain presents him, is hardly

a caricature. Rather, he is the moral center of the book,

a man of courage and nobility, who risks his freedom ?

risks his life — for the sake of his friend Huck. (Swalden 2)

Booker T. Washington noted how Twain “succeeded in making his readers

feel a genuine respect for ‘Jim,? and pointed out that Twain, in creating Jim’s

character, had “exhibited his sympathy and interest in the masses of the

Negro people.” The great black novelist Ralph Ellison noted how Twain

allows Jim’s “dignity and human capacity” to emerge in the novel. He stated:

Huckleberry Finn knew, as did Mark Twain, that Jim

was not only a slave but a human being, a symbol of

humanity . . . and in freeing Jim, Huck makes a bid to

free himself of the conventionalized evil taken for

civilization by the town.

And on those occasions when Twain does compare blacks and whites, the

comparison is not flattering to the whites. Things like “One of my

theories is that the hearts of men are about alike, all over the world,

whatever their skin-complexions may be ?. Another time he stated “Nearly all

black and brown skins are beautiful, but a beautiful white skin is rare” . He

also said “There are many humorous things in the world; among them is the

white man’s notion that he is less savage than all the other savages”. These

statements were noted in an essay by Peter Swalden who in summation

states ?Mark Twain a “racist”! Isn’t it about time we put this ridiculous notion

to rest? (1). Because he is a black man fleeing slavery, Jim faces many struggles.

He is constantly reminded of the dangers of running and is threatened by his

capture. He is also forced to accept the fact that his race makes him inferior to a

white, and even a friend like Huck is still of higher status. Huck and Jim overcome

the race barrier, only after Huck overcomes the inner struggle of whether to save

Jim or not. Huck’s idea of racism is based on his upbringing, but he himself

questions the validity of these statements of black inferiority (Ritter 1).

Throughout the novel societies voice is heard through Huck. The

racist and hateful contempt which existed at the time is present, but it is

essential for the reader to see how Twain opposes these ideas throughout

the novel. Twains brings out the ugliness of society and causes the reader to

challenge the original description of Jim. In a subtle matter, he creates a

challenge to slavery (Wallace 12).

After a careful examination of the book, one can realize that Twain is

attempting to show us the vast problems that society has. One of those

problems is slavery, so he gives the reader an idea of the runaway slave?s

position. Regardless of whether his interpretation of the slave?s position is

correct or not, it is not an attempt to degrade blacks, but rather an effort to show

the reader that in Twain?s opinion, slavery is wrong. Twain?s novel was not

intended to be a book about slavery, it was intended to be a book which showed

how wrong society was. Twain not only shows the reader that there are things

which need to be changed, but also points out quite a few things which need

modification. Mark Twain put a plea for humanity, for the end of castes, and of its

cruelties in all of his stories (Allen 260). Mark Twain’s main purposes in

producing this work seems clear, he wishes to bring to attention some of man’s

often hidden shortcomings. At the time the story was written, nobody

considered race to be a major factor in the novel and Twain himself was more

than likely one of the least-racist United States citizens alive during his time.

Many critics have also realized that this novel is not racist in nature. One of

the most prominent critics said, ?Its satirical mode forces us to recognize the

inconsistencies in our moral consciousness? (Nichols 210). Nichols? argument is

one of the strongest in favor of Huckleberry Finn. This argument illustrates his

point that the main theme of this novel is to show its reader that times have

been much worse and that we did not always enjoy the freedoms we take for

granted today. This is very true. For example, Pap, Huck?s father, is a blatant

racist and displays it often. A main example is when he rants and raves because

they allowed a black man to vote. He bellows, ?But when they told me that there

was a state in this country where they?d let that nigger vote, I drawed out?.

(Twain 69). By reading this passage, the reader can get a sense of what is was

like back in the early nineteenth century before blacks were freed showing the

differences between our times and times one hundred years ago. From this

statement, the reader can learn and be thankful that man has stopped such

practices and evolved to a more tolerant society. Another example that supports

Nicholls statement is shown when Sherburn killed Boggs in cold blood. A local

lynch mob comes to hang Sherburn and a near-riot situation happens. An event

like this shows the reader how man has changed and bettered himself from his

ancestors. Today, we give accused killers rights, ?due process of law?, and

proceed in a more civilized manner (Marx 22). These differences between now and

over one hundred years ago show the reader how the human race has advanced. If

this novel can teach its reader about the evils of the past, then, perhaps, such

evils will not happen again (Smiley 1).

In conclusion, educated readers and critics alike have realized that Mark

Twain meant no disrespect to black people in his novel Huckleberry Finn. It can even

be said that this book was anti ? slavery and did more disrespect to whites than

blacks.

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