

Allen Webb

(*English Journal*, Nov. 1993, Reprinted with revision in [Literature and Lives](#), NCTE Press, 2001)

A masterpiece. -T.S. Elliot

One of the world's great books and one of the central documents of American culture.- Lionel Trilling

All modern American literature comes from one book by Mark Twain called *Huckleberry Finn*... There was nothing before. There has been nothing as good since. -Ernest Hemingway

For the past forty years, black families have trekked to schools in numerous districts throughout the country to say, ³This book is not good for our children,² only to be turned away by insensitive and often unwittingly racist teachers and administrators who respond, ³This book is a classic.² -John H. Wallace

Huckleberry Finn may be the most exalted single work of American literature. Praised by our best known critics and writers, the novel is enshrined at the center of the American literature curriculum. According to Arthur Applebee the work is second only to Shakespeare in the frequency it appears in the classroom and is required in 70% of public high schools and 76% of parochial high schools. The most taught novel, the most taught long work, and the most taught piece of American literature, *Huckleberry Finn* is a staple from junior high (where eleven chapters are included in the Junior Great Books program) to graduate school. Written in a now vanished dialect, told from the point of view of a runaway fourteen-year-old, the novel conglomerates melodramatic boyhood adventure, farcical low comedy, and pointed social satire. Yet at its center is a relationship between a white boy and an escaped slave, an association freighted with the tragedy and the possibility of American history. Despite a social order set against interracial communication and respect, Huck develops a comradeship with Jim for which he is willing against all he has been taught to risk his soul.

Despite the novel's sanctified place and overtly anti-racist message, since school desegregation in the 1950s, black Americans have raised objections to *Huckleberry Finn* and its effect on their children. Linking their complaints with the efforts of other groups to influence the curriculum, we English teachers have seen the issue as one of censorship, defending the novel and our right to teach it. In so doing we have been properly concerned: the freedom of English teachers to design and implement curriculum must be protected as censorship undermines the creation of an informed citizenry able to make critical judgments between competing ideas. Yet, considering the objections to *Huckleberry Finn* only in terms of freedom and censorship doesn't resolve potentially divisive situations that can arise in either high school or college settings. For this we need to listen to objections raised to the novel and reconsider the process of teaching it. Entering into a dialogue with those that have objections to *Huckleberry Finn* can help us think the dynamics of race in literature courses and about the way literature depicts, interrogates, and affirms our national culture and history.

A ³communication shut-down² is the way I would describe what happened in November 1991 in a largely white suburb just next door to where I train English teachers. African American student and parent concerns during the teaching of *Huckleberry Finn* led to a decision to immediately remove the text from the classroom in the district's two high schools. Required to read a brief statement to

their students stating that the book had been withdrawn, teachers were prohibited from further discussion of *Huckleberry Finn* or reasons for its removal until ³more sensitive² approaches were found. Local television and newspaper reporters learned of the story, and English teachers, students, parents, and administrators suddenly and unexpectedly found themselves at the center of a difficult and very public controversy. An impassioned meeting at the high school made the nightly news. A subsequent meeting with the school board was broadcast on the cable access channel. Expressing sentiments that might be echoed by many across the country, these teachers felt that they had been teaching appropriately all along. One teacher told the local paper, ³We have shown a concerted effort to express what we call sensitivity,² and ³we feel a very strong kinship to this book because of what we believe it stands for² (Kalamazoo Gazette, 11/26/91). Upset that their freedom in the classroom was impinged, these teachers were also confused and pained that parents should find the text and their methods insensitive.

On the other side black students who raised concerns with teachers about the book felt they had not been listened to, and black parents concluded that a tight-knit group of narrow-minded teachers had shut out and demeaned their legitimate concerns. Some white students were angry that the complaints of the black students meant they couldn't finish reading the book. Some black students felt that long friendships with white students were in jeopardy. In sum, parents were angry with teachers, teachers felt threatened and misunderstood, administrators went in various directions but failed to follow policies already in place, and students were alienated from the school and from one another. In the following year the novel was reinstated, but to this day teachers remain understandably nervous about using it, unclear as to why blacks object to it, and uncertain just how it should best be taught. As with many similar incidents that have occurred again and again around the country, this controversy over *Huckleberry Finn* only exacerbated problems of interracial communication and respect.

We can and must do better. Doing better begins with English teachers at all levels taking a careful look at the complex racial issues raised by the novel and an active listening to the views of African Americans, teachers, scholars, writers, parents, and students. That *Huckleberry Finn* draws the attention of black families should not be a surprise. Since no text by a black (or any other minority group member for that matter) has yet to make it to the list of most frequently taught works (according to Applebee's research), *Huckleberry Finn* has a peculiar visibility. The novel remains the only one of the most taught works in high school to treat slavery, to represent a black dialect, and to have a significant role for an African American character. The length of the novel, the demands it places on instructional time, its centrality in the curriculum augment its prominence. Add to this the presence in the novel of the most powerful racial epithet in English (the word appears 213 times) and it is evident why *Huckleberry Finn* legitimately concerns African American parents sending their children into racially mixed classrooms.

Huckleberry Finn has also consistently attracted the attention of prominent black scholars and writers who, since the 1950's, have thought carefully about the work, its cultural contexts, and its role in the curriculum. We are fortunate to have much of their analysis readily available in a paperback volume entitled *Satire or Evasion? Black Perspectives on Huckleberry Finn* (Durham: Duke UP, 1992). Every contributor is concerned with the role of *Huckleberry Finn* in the classroom; most are professors and teachers at leading universities, some have high school experience. The diverse and divergent Cultural Studies essays in *Satire and Evasion* demonstrate the complexity of Twain's novel and the racial issues it raises. In addition to the articles, *Satire and Evasion* contains an annotated bibliography on issues of race, the novel, and the classroom. The collection begins with an essay by John H. Wallace, the black school administrator at Mark Twain Intermediate School in Fairfax Virginia who played a prominent role in the debates over the novel

in the early 1980's. Wallace's essay is followed by others that take significantly different and more subtle positions, but most contributors agree on several key points.

First, they make a persuasive case that Twain's depiction of Jim owes much to the popular nineteenth-century black-face minstrel show where white actors darkened their skin to the color of coal to render comic burlesques of African American speech and manners. This insight is not entirely new: more than fifty years ago Ralph Ellison wrote that "Twain fitted Jim into the outlines of the minstrel tradition, and it is from behind this stereotype mask that we see Jim's dignity and human capacity and Twain's complexity" (65). While Ellison noted Twain's talent, he remarked on a fundamental ambivalence in Jim's portrayal that justified the discomfort of the "Negro" reader. He found Jim "a white man's inadequate portrait of a slave" (72). (Ellison's essay "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke," frequently referred to in *Satire and Evasion*, is found in its entirety in *Shadow and Act*, New York: Signet, 1964, 61-73). *Satire or Evasion* considerably elaborates Ellison's remarks. The contributors offer significant evidence that Twain himself was an avid fan of the black-face minstrelsy. Bernard Bell, a professor of English at the University of Massachusetts, quotes from one of Twain's letters: "The minstrel used a very broad Negro dialect; he used it competently and with easy facility and it was funny <delightfully and satisfyingly funny" (128). When the shows appeared to be dying out in the early twentieth century Bell points out that Twain lamented the loss of "the real nigger show (the genuine nigger show, the extravagant nigger show (the show which to me has no peer and whose peer has not arrived" (127).

As his affection for the minstrel show indicates, and the contributors point out, Twain's personal attitudes toward blacks were contradictory. His father and uncle owned slaves, yet his wife was the daughter of a prominent abolitionist. He fought briefly with the confederate army, yet later in life paid a black student's way through Yale Law School. Though he protested against lynching and discrimination, he loved minstrel shows and "nigger jokes." In their essay Frederick Woodward and Donnarae MacCann, a professor and a graduate student at the University of Iowa, argue that Twain's affection for the minstrel show is fundamental to the portrayal of Jim, "The swaggering buffoonery of the minstrel clown is represented early in the novel when Jim awakes and finds his hat in a tree (one of Tom's tricks), and then concocts a tale about witches and the devil" (145). They argue that: "The stage Negro's typical banter about wife troubles, profit making, spooks, and formal education is echoed in episodes in *Huckleberry Finn*, and their inclusion can be traced to a period when Twain was in the midst of planning a new tour of stage readings. Jim gives his impression of "King Sollermun" and his harem in a minstrel-like repartee (chap. 14) and his confusion about stock market profits is seen in a farcical account of how Jim's stock (his cow failed to increase his fourteen dollar fortune when he "tuck to speculat'n" (chap. 8). Throughout the novel Jim is stupefied by information that Huck shares with him, as when they discuss Louis XVI's "little boy the dolphin." (145) Several scholars in *Satire and Evasion* point out that in the sequels that Twain wrote to *Huckleberry Finn* (*Tom Sawyer Abroad* and the unfinished *Tom Sawyer's Conspiracy*) Jim also appears as "the patient simpleton" and "Huck and Tom amuse themselves while risking Jim's dignity and even his life" (152). In this view even the affection Huck and the reader feel for Jim fits with the minstrel tradition where the comic black characters are congenial and non-threatening.

While a couple of the contributors to *Satire or Evasion* develop complex explanations of how the end of the novel serves as "Twain's satire on the extremes to which the defeated Confederacy went to keep the black population enslaved" (213), for the most part these African American scholars and teachers are profoundly disappointed with *Huck Finn's* final chapters. Although Jim runs away early on in the book, his independence is downplayed because he never makes his own way to freedom; it is Miss Watson's benevolence rather than Jim's intelligence or courage that gain him his liberty. Further, the believability of the *deus ex machina* freeing of Jim depends on an unsustainably

innocent view of racial relations. Speaking of the public knowledge that Jim is suspected of killing Huck, writer and English professor Julius Lester comments, ³Yet we are now to believe that an old white lady would free a black slave suspected of murdering a white child. White people may want to believe such fairy tales about themselves, but blacks know better² (203).

In examining the conclusion of the novel these scholars are troubled by the way that the developing relationship between Jim and Huck abruptly seems to lose its meaning as Huck accedes to Tom Sawyer's cruel and senseless manipulations. Rhett Jones, an English professor at Rutgers, writes: ³The high adventures of the middle chapters, Huck's admiration of Jim, Jim's own strong self-confidence, and the slave's willingness to protect and guide Huck are all, in some sense, rendered meaningless by the closing chapters, in which Twain turns Jim over to two white boys on a lark² (186). Jones views Huck's failure to speak up, his only protest being to compare stealing ³a nigger² to ³a watermelon, or a Sunday school book², as Huck finally rejecting Jim's humanity. He points out that Huck in the closing paragraph is careful to tell the reader all about Tom and himself, including Aunt Sally's plans to adopt him. But the reader who is interested in learning what Jim intends to do, how he intends to rejoin his family, and what plans he has for freeing them is left in the dark when Huck flatly concludes, $\text{\textcircled{E}}$ There ain't nothing more to write about.¹ Huck is not interested in the fate of Jim \langle much less that of his family \rangle nor is Tom; nor, evidently, was Twain. (190) Bernard Bell puts it simply: ³Twain \langle nostalgically and metaphorically-- sells Jim down river for laughs at the end² (138). Seen from the point of view of some of these scholars even the most cherished aspects of the book begin to appear ambiguous, compromised. Focusing on the portrayal of Jim in the latter part of the book, particularly the testimony of the doctor who recaptures Jim after Jim has risked freedom to stand by the injured Tom, Julius Lester comments: It is a picture of the only kind of black that whites have every truly liked \langle faithful, tending sick whites, not speaking, not causing trouble, and totally passive. He is the archetypal $\text{\textcircled{E}}$ good nigger,¹ who lacks self-respect, dignity, and a sense of self separate from the one whites what him to have. A century of white readers have accepted this characterization because it permits their own $\text{\textcircled{E}}$ humanity¹ to shine through with more luster.¹ (203)

Some of the scholars are even critical of Huck's reasoning when he decides to ³go to hell² for Jim. Jones points out that while Huck considers ³Jim's love for him, Jim's humanity, and, most important, the ways in which Jim has served Huck², Huck ³concludes that Jim has done a great deal for him but in none of his reflections does he consider Jim's own needs, much less those of his wife and children² (188). Shelly Fisher Fishkin puts forward a well publicized argument in *Was Huck Black: Mark Twain and African American Voices* (New York: Oxford UP, 1993) that Twain patterned Huck's speech on that of black children thus suggesting a close interrelationship between racial identities in the novel. Her position is anticipated in *Satire and Evasion* by Arnold Rampersand, Professor of English at Princeton, who makes the case that Huck Finn, with its stress on folk culture, on dialect, and on American humor, can be seen to be ³near the fountainhead² for African American writers such as Hughes, Hurston, Ellison, and Walker. Rampersand explores issues of alienation in the novel, comparing Twain to Wright, Baldwin, and Morrison, yet he argues that the major compromise of the novel is not the ending, but that Jim never gains the intellectual complexity of Huck; never becomes a figure of disruptive alienation, nor does he even seem capable of learning this from Huck. ³Assuredly Twain knew that Huck's attitude could be contagious, and that blacks had more reason than whites to be alienated and angry² (226), Rampersand writes. Consequently despite the close relationship Huck and Jim develop on the raft- and the possibility that Huck's own language may owe something to black dialect their roles and human possibilities are kept irresolutely separate and unequal.

In her study of American fiction (*Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1992) Toni Morrison \langle winner of the Pulitzer Prize for her own

novel about slavery, *Beloved* goes farther in criticizing *Huckleberry Finn* than the contributors to *Satire and Evasion*. Morrison believes that in the novel there is a close ³interdependence of slavery and freedom, of Huck's growth and Jim's serviceability within it, and even of Mark Twain's inability to continue, to explore the journey into free territory² (55). She is struck by two things in the novel: ³the apparently limitless store of love and compassion the black man has for his white friend and white masters; and his assumption that the whites are indeed what they say they are, superior and adult² (56). According to Morrison, Jim permits his persecutors to torment him, humiliate him, and responds to the torment and humiliation with boundless love. The humiliation comes after we have experienced Jim as an adult, a caring father and a sensitive man. If Jim had been a white ex-convict befriended by Huck, the ending could not have been imagined or written. (56) What is above all disturbing about the novel, Morrison argues, is not its portrayal of Jim, ³but what Mark Twain, Huck, and especially Tom need from him.²(57) Rather than merely a white man's limited portrait of a slave, the novel demonstrates the inadequacy of Euro-American utopian aspirations; Morrison says *Huck Finn* ³simulates and describes the parasitic nature of white freedom² (57). In her reading, then, the American dream of freedom may well be embodied in Huck and Jim's time on the river, but if so then that very dream itself is fundamentally flawed, resting on a shedding of social responsibility and a failure to examine relations of subservience.

The racial problematics of *Huckleberry Finn* are partly ³corrected² in the 1994 Hollywood film version. The film shuns the complexities of irony and satire that make understanding the novel difficult. All points of view are simply and directly argued, offending passages are cut away. All 213 repetitions of the racial epithet are simply eliminated. The Widow Douglas espouses an explicitly abolitionist position. Above all, Jim is a far stronger character. His superstitiousness becomes a self-conscious put-on, and rather than being frightened of Huck and thinking him a ghost when they meet on Jackson Island, it is Jim that surprises and frightens Huck. Running away with a plan and a map, Jim exercises planning and foresight. Still ridiculed by being dressed up as an ³African² by the Duke and King, Jim is for the most part more articulate: he directly argues for the elimination of slavery. Also enhancing the depiction of Jim is the film's elimination of Tom Sawyer. Without Tom, the scene in the second chapter where Jim is mocked by stealing his hat disappears. The problematic final eleven chapters of the novel where Jim is a helpless and gullible figure for Tom's scheming are simply done away with. By making Huck (instead of Tom, as in the novel) the injured boy that Jim must save, the climax of the film becomes a reciprocating act of friendship, rather than a *deus ex machine* revelation that Jim has all along been free. Although far from examining slavery from an African American perspective or telling its full horror, the film does add scenes of a plantation with a cruel overseer whipping slaves, Jim among them. Huck views this brutality, consciously examines his own complicity in the system of racial inequality, explicitly and determinedly rejects slavery as an institution, and makes a personal apology for his own complicity with slavery to Jim. None of this is in Twain's novel. Rather than serving as a contemporary testament to Twain's greatness, the radically revised film simply points to significant problems with the text. After watching the film with my school age son, I had a troubling and, for an English teacher, iconoclastic thought: might this Hollywood production be more effective with students than the novel itself?

My own experience with students in the classroom would seem to verify the observation that one's cultural background influences one's reaction to the novel. Recently I taught *Huckleberry Finn* in two classes with racially different student populations and had clearly divergent results. The first class was in the fall, a college-level Black American Literature class with a Cultural Studies approach to the theme of slavery. The class included a wide range of primary and secondary material from the seventeenth century to the present. We studied depictions of slavery by black authors such as Olaudah Equiano, Frederick Douglas, Linda Brent, Nat Turner, Langston Hughes, Ishmail Reed, and Toni Morrison and white authors Aphra Behn, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Caroline

Lee Hentz, Herman Melville, and Mark Twain. We viewed segments of ³Roots² and read historical essays (including chapters from Howard Zinn's *A People's History*) and contemporary studies about slavery (see appendix for list of materials). The course enrollment was 50% African Americans and 50% white students, from Detroit and medium size towns through out Michigan.

Given the historical and thematic integration of the course, each new text we read was examined in light of what we already knew, and, simultaneously, the new texts lead us to fundamentally rethink our previous reading. For example, it wasn't until after reading Frederick Douglass, Linda Brent, and Nat Turner that my students, both white and black, were able to fully recognize the stereotyping in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Stowe's black characters appeared as stock figures in a white abolitionist imagination only after coming to know the intellectually questing Douglass, the trapped and emotionally conflicted Brent, and the violent and unrepentant Turner. Focusing on an historical theme and putting the texts next to each other created a Cultural Studies experience that encouraged students to make sophisticated judgments, write complex papers, and engage in increasingly meaningful discussions. After reading and discussing *Huckleberry Finn* in the context of this class my African American college students from freshman to seniors (many of them planning to become teachers themselves) were concerned about the use of *Huckleberry Finn* in the high school, an institution they themselves had only recently left. Some of these students talked about their own experience as the only or nearly the only African American student in an otherwise white classroom. In this situation they resented being turning to as experts by their white teachers, and they were uncomfortable being stared at by their fellow students. One of the brightest and most outspoken students a popular college Junior and an actor who had done stage appearances as Malcolm X spoke of how as a high school sophomore he had read *Huckleberry Finn*, felt demeaned and angry in the process, and yet considered himself so isolated by his situation as the only black person in the classroom that he was unable to share his reaction even privately with his teacher. What does it tell us about the challenge we teachers face in attempting to teach the novel that such a student, in this case the son of two college professors, lacked confidence to raise the issue?

I read several passages of the book aloud to the class to set up a discussion. One of the passages was the paragraph where Tom and Huck trick Jim in the second chapter. In this paragraph the epithet occurs seven times. Although I read the passage gently and as ³sensitively² as I could, it was clear that hearing the word come out of my mouth made my African American college students bristle. One African American student (who was, in fact, of a mixed racial background and thus particularly acute on the question) was quite direct with me in the discussion afterwards. He pointed out that while this word may be used by blacks with other blacks, it simply must not be used by whites. In his opinion while a black teacher might be able to read *Huckleberry Finn* aloud, a white teacher, no matter how ³sympathetic,² simply could not read the work aloud without offending black students.

Still trying to understand the issue of *Huckleberry Finn* in the classroom, the following semester I again taught the novel, this time in a literature teaching methods class for fifth-year English majors who themselves would soon be student teachers in high school and middle school language arts classrooms. In addition to reading *Huckleberry Finn* we read Frederick Douglass, Nat Turner, Linda Brent, and several of the essays from *Satire and Evasion*. In contrast with the African American literature class, nearly all the students in this methods class are of Euro-American background (as are 98% of all the education students at our university). This particular term there was one African American student. She told me after the course was over that the only day that she really felt completely comfortable in the room was the day that we had a black professor (and eight black students from my course in the fall) come to join us for a discussion of the novel. Simply having more people of color in the class and listening to their point of view had a powerful impact on all the students. Up until that day all of the white students were confident that they would be able to teach *Huckleberry Finn* in appropriate and sensitive ways; after that day although most of them

decided that they would teach the novel, their final projects indicated that they realized it would be a complex task indeed.

Those who still want to teach *Huckleberry Finn* after reading this chapter and exploring the perspectives offered by *Satire and Evasion* can marshal impressive arguments for their cause, not the least of which is the importance of having students examine the issue for themselves. In literature courses we are sometimes so busy trying to “cover all the material” or “expose” our students to “great literature” that we fail to take the time to focus in, develop connections between works and contexts, and explore the relevance of what we read to the present. It is crystal clear to me that *Huckleberry Finn* should not be taught in a curriculum that simply showcases literary works without developing student skills at challenging the classics and thinking critically about literature, history, politics, and language. In other words, *Huckleberry Finn* should not be taught simply within a New Critical perspective. To ethically teach this novel involves entering into a response-based Cultural Studies approach that, at a minimum, requires: 1) Teaching *Huckleberry Finn* in a way that is sensitive to the racial makeup and dynamics of the classroom. 2) Openly addressing the presence of the racial epithet in the text and developing a strategy for use or avoidance of the term in the classroom. 3) Along with reading the book, examining objections to the Twain’s portrayal of African Americans and texts about slavery written by black authors. (See appendix.) 4) Informing the parents of high school age students that the text will be used and offering intellectually meaningful alternative assignments when these students or parents are uncomfortable with the novel.

Several of these points need clarification. For example, the dynamics of teaching *Huckleberry Finn* differ considerably from classroom to classroom, based on the race of the teacher and the proportion of minority students in the classroom, as well as on local social, cultural, and political factors. Talking across racial lines about questions of race always carries emotional impact in high school or college. The issues require a sensitivity and intellectual maturity from students that is not ordinary found below the eleventh grade. Teachers and students who undertake to read *Huck Finn* must be committed to respecting and learning from minority views, yet I do not recommend that a classroom vote or even a consensus process be used to decide whether or not *Huckleberry Finn* should be read. This difficult decision should be that of the teacher, letting students decide may put unfair pressure on those students who might object to reading the work, alienating them from their classmates.

The racial make-up of the classroom is a complex factor in teaching *Huckleberry Finn* that requires further consideration. While we might wish that fifty years after *Brown vs. Board of Education* classrooms without black students would be increasingly rare, a de facto racial segregation is still the norm in many of America’s suburbs, rural areas, and in many private schools. Even in racially mixed urban schools tracking often leads to racially segregated classrooms. And universities are often just as segregated as the public schools, if not more so. In a classroom without African Americans or other students of color, teachers often mistakenly believe that they are “off the hook” and need not deal with racial issues. As the country and the world become increasingly interrelated and as the current white majority in this country becomes a minority in the twenty-first century, it will, however, be all the more imperative for white students to learn a multicultural literature and history and to participate in Cultural Studies curriculums. Indeed, a classroom without African Americans presents particular difficulties for the teacher and students reading *Huckleberry Finn*. Lacking black voices it will be difficult for “sympathy” or “understanding” to be more than superficial. Issues of race may be treated at a safe though somewhat uncomfortable intellectual distance: “I think that they would think...” “If I were black I would feel...” In a classroom without blacks some students may seek to relieve the tension that a discussion of race brings by making supposedly funny, but actually inappropriate racial remarks. A white teacher in this situation needs

to make it clear from the outset that such remarks are not acceptable whether or not blacks are present to hear them. Students and parents in such contexts may resent any time spent on racial questions or on black history and culture as ³too much² time, yet for these students more time is necessary to understanding the literature and prepare for democratic citizenship. Inviting black speakers to the class, whatever their viewpoint, is especially important.

It is relatively easy for white teachers to argue for the importance of multicultural perspectives and racial understanding, while teachers of color, black or otherwise, attempting the same pedagogy may be perceived as ³hypersensitive,² ³activist,² or be accused of ³reverse racism.² When issues of race come up in classes where students of color constitute a small minority, these students will sense, often accurately, that they are being singled out, that the other students are looking at them, waiting for a reaction. In a letter to the *New York Times* Allan Ballard describes his experience in a predominately white junior high school in Philadelphia in the 1950s:

I can still recall the anger I felt as my white classmates read aloud the word ³nigger.² In fact, as I write this letter I am getting angry all over again. I wanted to sink into my seat. Some of the whites snickered, others giggled. I can recall nothing of the literary merits of this work that you term ³the greatest of all American novels.² I only recall the sense of relief I felt when I would flip ahead a few pages and see that the word ³nigger² would not be read that hour. (Allan B Ballard, in *Satire or Evasion*, 29)

Non-black teachers need to understand that it may be difficult for black students, even the most able, to express their reservations or concerns about matters of race to their teacher. Silent refusal to read the novel, distracting comments or behavior, an excess of humor in the classroom by students asked to read *Huckleberry Finn* should be seen by teachers not as student insubordination or narrow-mindedness but as inchoate expressions of resistance to a possibly inappropriate curriculum or pedagogy.

Since a special burden falls on them, African American students have a right to expect that they will be consulted in advance of reading and discussing the novel. Particularly if the teacher is Euro-American, it is important that minority students know that their teacher is aware of their position. Minority students can be told that when they write or participate in discussion that they can choose to either speak ³just as person² or, if they choose to, identify their viewpoint with that of other African Americans. In a classroom where half or more of the students are black, African American students are less likely to feel isolated. Yet in these classrooms also teachers still need to find ways to affirm student voices and facilitate communicate between racial groups. Small group discussion plays a particularly important role in this classroom. Such groups will probably be more racially mixed if students are assigned by ³counting off², though group self-selection may be important in helping to build comfort level and confidence. Unless their purposes are made explicit, teachers should avoid overtly separating groups by race.

As a white teacher with about half African American students, I observe an evolution in class discussion. In the first weeks the majority of large group discussion volunteers are often white. As we work with small groups, as I show an interest in listening to minority perspectives, as black teachers and colleagues visit my classroom, and as I invite non-volunteers to participate, a more balanced class discussion evolves. African American or any other minority voices are not automatically affirmed just because African American students are present in the classroom. Since African American or minority culture is not the focus of academic attention in most schools or universities (even institutions with a majority of ³minority² students) it is not a fair for teachers to assume that these students know ³their² history or literature. Thus it may be just as important for

students in a class with a larger percentage of black students, for example, to acquaint themselves with complimentary background materials from African American perspectives.

In addition to carefully considering the racial dynamics of the classroom, in reading *Huckleberry Finn* it is important to recognize the power of language, in particular racial epithets. Teachers make a mistake when they excuse Twain's use of the term on the grounds that it was accepted in his time. All of the scholars I have read on the subject agree with professor David L. Smith that, "Even when Twain was writing his book, 'nigger' was universally recognized as an insulting, demeaning word" (*Satire and Evasion*, 107). Peaches Henry, former high school teacher and graduate student at Columbia University, describes the history and politics of the word:

To dismiss the word's recurrence in the work as an accurate rendition of nineteenth-century American linguistic conventions denies what every black person knows: far more than a synonym for slave, 'nigger' signifies a concept. It conjures centuries of specifically black degradation and humiliation during which the family was disintegrated, education was denied, manhood was trapped within a forced perpetual puerilism, and womanhood was destroyed by concubinage. If one grants that Twain substituted 'nigger' for 'slave,' the implications of the word do not improve; 'nigger' denotes the black man as a commodity, as chattel... 'Nigger' encapsulates the decades of oppression that followed emancipation. It means not only racist terror and lynch mobs but that victims deserve it. Outside Central High in Little Rock in 1954 it was emblazoned across placards; and across the South throughout the 1950s and into the 1960s it was screamed by angry mobs.... So to impute black's abhorrence of 'nigger' to hypersensitivity compounds injustice with callousness and signals a refusal to acknowledge that the connotations of that word generate a cultural discomfort that blacks share with no other racial group. (31)

Henry believes that in teaching texts such as *Huckleberry Finn* or *To Kill a Mockingbird* the word should be "forced" into active class discourse in a controlled classroom setting because in her experience "students (black or white) could only face sensitive issues of race after they had achieved a certain emotional distance from the rhetoric of race" (41). She describes her experience with ninth graders: Unable to utter the taboo word 'nigger,' students would be paralyzed, the whites by their social awareness of the moral injunction against it and the black by their heightened sensitivity to it. Slowly, torturously, the wall of silence would begin to crumble before students' timid attempts to approach the topic with euphemism. Finally, after tense moments, one courageous adolescent would utter the word. As the class released an almost audible sigh of relief, the students and I would embark upon a lively and risk-taking exchange about race and its attendant complexities. (41-2) An open classroom discussion of racial epithets in a mixed classroom of ninth graders with a sensitive and able black teacher clearly offers important opportunities for learning. With a different student population and a different teacher the results might have been less positive.

Some teachers forbid the use of the word in the classroom and simply skip over it when the work is read aloud. Others speak the word only when they are quoting from a secondary source, such as the novel itself. Others use the expression "n-word" or "the racial epithet." No approach is guaranteed, but whatever approach is taken it should be done explicitly and be discussed by the students, in college or in high school. Discomfort with the word on the part of teachers or students may not be overcome by even the most sensitive approach and the problem of the racial epithet in the novel constitutes reason enough for some teachers to choose away from teaching the work. No teacher should be required to teach this novel. (The ethics of requiring teachers to teach *Huckleberry Finn* are explored by Wayne Booth in *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction*, Berkeley: U California P, 1988.)

There was a time when I thought it was silly not to teach *Huckleberry Finn* on the grounds that it was a racist novel. After reading and listening to African American scholars, teacher, parents, and students I have changed my mind. Gerald Graff has urged English teachers to ³teach the conflicts² (*Beyond the Culture Wars*, New York: Norton, 1992), and at teacher's conferences in Oregon and Michigan I have advocated using the novel in a Cultural Studies framework and along with other works as an opportunity for students to develop their own critical thinking about literature, racism, and the literary canon. Given the prominence of *Huckleberry Finn* in the curriculum, the attempt to teach it in a truly anti-racist way marks a starting point, a much needed improvement over business as usual. I realize that sometimes it is necessary for English classrooms to be uncomfortable, and that if we fail to challenge established ways of knowing, contrast viewpoints, and broaden perspectives we fail to do our job. Yet we must be careful that such discomfort is experienced equally rather than focused on an oppressed group that is desperately struggling for school success.

It is timely for us English teachers to look beyond *Huckleberry Finn*, to find other works that might be more appropriate for all our students and more effective in creating multicultural communities of learning in our classrooms. Educating white students about prejudice with a text that is alienating to blacks perpetuates racist priorities, does it not?. There is no excuse for the fact that not even one of the most taught works in American high schools is written from a minority perspective<or that many college courses still include very little African American literature. Why aren't the great African American novels of Richard Wright, Zora Neal Hurston, Ralph Ellison or Alice Walker more central to our teaching? Moreover, race is not the only disturbing issue when we consider the role of *Huckleberry Finn* in the classroom; we also need to ask other questions, about the novel's treatment of women, for instance, about its effect on women students, and the overwhelming male orientation of our curriculum. Julius Lester states:

[*In Huckleberry Finn*] civilization is equated with education, regularity, decency, and being cramped up, and the representations of civilization are women... The fact that the novel is regarded as a classic tells us much about the psyche of the white American male, because the novel is a power evocation of puer, the eternal boy for whom growth, maturity, and responsibility are enemies. (*Satire and Evasion*, 205)