Is *Huck Finn* Still Relevant? Revisiting “The Case for Conflict”

What is the contemporary relevance of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* for today’s English classrooms? Should this beloved selection of the literary canon be eliminated, as a required text, from high schools in the United States?

These questions are not only relevant, but their answers are necessary as our nation moves deeper into the 21st century. Our rendezvous with inevitable demographic change means that teachers are entering classrooms that are more diverse than ever. Diversity and difference lead to divergences in opinions and perspectives, including over what should be taught. In a 2008 *English Journal* article, "The Case for Conflict," Mary Ellen Dakin noted divergent opinions, based on one’s lived experiences, about the teaching of *Huck Finn*.

In the Elizabethan theatre at the Folger Shakespeare Library in 1994, a discussion about the power of Shakespeare’s words somehow became a dispute about the N-word, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, and censorship. I was one of thirty-five English teachers from around the country participating in the Teaching Shakespeare Institute, and a scholar’s morning lecture had cut through the flesh of text to the bone of experience. Azalie Hightower, a teacher in a local Washington, DC public school, proclaimed softly that she no longer welcomed Huck into her classroom. I said then with thoughtless ease what I say now with tempered deliberation: “Huck Finn isn’t racist; it’s about racists and race in America.” Not as a Black woman to a White woman, but as one English teacher to another, Azalie said to me, “Think of the most hateful word a man can call a woman.” I did. “Would you like to read a book that had that word on almost every page?” She paused. “And would you like to read it,” she asked, “when you were sixteen and in a classroom filled with boys?”

The impetus for the conflict in the conversation Dakin recounts was Mark Twain’s novel *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, a text that has often been censored in American classrooms for its judicious use of the word *n******. Dakin’s rationale for teaching *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* was that it “isn’t racist; it’s about racists and race in America.” She implied that her rationale had shifted from thoughtless ease to tempered deliberation because of Azalie Hightower’s responses to her. It was also implied Hightower no longer taught *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* because of its use of “the most hateful word” that a person of African descent can be called. To explain and clarify her position on the word, Hightower appealed to the fact that both she and the author were English teachers, and talked about the implications of teaching *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* for classroom management.

Hightower also drew an analogy between the use of *n****** in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and the use of *c*** in contemporary literature so that her White colleague could understand the terrible weight of the word when directed at a Black person from someone outside our community. I found this rhetorical strategy fascinating. It could be argued that due to misogynoir, or the double burden of race and gender, slurs like *c*** are amplified for Black women (Bailey). Intersectionality, "the fact that..."
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women of color are situated within at least two subordinated groups that frequently pursue conflicting political agendas” (Crenshaw 363), mattered in the conversation between Dakin and Hightower years ago, and continues to matter today.

It was also relevant that Hightower spoke to Dakin not only as a Black woman to a White woman, but also as one English teacher to another. This is significant. While the challenges of negotiating empathy and shared understanding across racial differences can be argued, our species—Homo sapiens—negotiates solidarity across differences through discourse (talk) and narrative (stories). As we tell stories, and truly listen to one another, our divergent experiences meet in the space between us. After reading “The Case for Conflict,” the English teachers in my dissertation workshop at Rainfield High School—my former colleagues—wanted to talk. They responded by telling stories from their own teaching practice and commenting on the stories of others. I was surprised by how candid they were as they shared anecdotes from the literary lessons that led to disagreement and misunderstanding. While the teachers in the group differed by race, religion, gender, age, and time in the profession, what they had in common was significant: they were teaching the same students.

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Erin [in response to “The Case for Conflict”]: I remember feeling exactly those same feelings about Huck Finn. I mean, making that assumption that this is, you know, the greatest text in American literature and having that conversation with someone. Not that they . . . awakened . . . you know, or changed my awareness based on . . . you know, sharing exactly how it was for them to, I mean, I didn’t get it. This text states it so clearly. I mean, I get it now. Through reading this. But in the conversation I had with a peer, I didn’t get it the same way. I was still coming from my, you know, White middle class, you know, “wow, what a great piece of literature, this is breakthrough. How can a Black man and a White man on a raft together, you know, and you can even read it as queer literature . . . how can this not be the greatest thing since sliced bread?

Ebony: I think that’s a really provocative and interesting response. I . . . I’ve had similar reactions to canonical pieces, coming at it from an opposite lens. So I can totally relate to that. Like, how does a Black girl from Detroit relate to Shakespeare? Or you know, making the case and selling it to kids. Anybody else? What are your thoughts?

Jane: I think the questions that were posed [by Hightower] made it a little bit easier to open it up for consideration at least.

Ebony: Can you say more about that?

Jane: Um, it wasn’t done in a very forceful way. It was done in a sincere questioning way that the first person could relate to (Thomas, We’re).

Although we have all had different experiences with race in our society, finding ways to relate to each other is vital. It is indeed easier in our classrooms to sidestep racial conflict instead of dealing with it, especially when Toni Morrison observed in Playing in the Dark that “in matters of race, silence and evasion have historically ruled literary discourse” (9). Morrison further observed that this “habit of ignoring race is understood to be a graceful, even generous, liberal gesture” (9–10). Yet if literature fosters empathy, then English educators have roles to play in the great democratic experiment of schooling in these United States. That role is to guide students through the reading and interpretation of stories, both fiction and nonfiction, that help us bridge our differences.

Perhaps award-winning Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie puts it best in her famous TED talk, “The Danger of a Single Story”: “I’ve always felt that it is impossible to engage properly with a place or a person without engaging with all of the stories of that place and that person. The consequence of the single story is this: It robs people of dignity. It makes our recognition of
our equal humanity difficult. It emphasizes how we are different rather than how we are similar” (Adichie). Given this fact, the fact that Black students have an emotional reaction to the judicious use of n***** throughout Adventures of Huckleberry Finn that other students might not is less of a critical concern in 2016 than what all students are learning about the humanity, dignity, and inherent worth of Black people through texts written during our fractured racial past. If Huckleberry Finn is one of the few novels in our already besieged curriculum charged with illustrating the fraught history of race in the United States for young people, we run the risk of telling a single story. When chattel slavery is focalized through the perspective of Huck instead of Jim, we run the risk of allowing a single story to shape our classrooms.

The cultural significance of Huckleberry Finn for the 19th century United States can no more be argued than that of To Kill a Mockingbird for the 20th century, when most of those reading these words came of age. Both novels will continue to have a place in our national story as we continue to wrestle with the moral dilemmas of the Founding (Thomas, “Next”). However, we would do well to reflect on the myriad ways that stories about Black Americans—real or imagined—are focalized primarily through the lenses of White authors (however brilliant and well-meaning) in many of our classrooms throughout the United States. Literary significance notwithstanding, if the only images of Black people in the novels that we teach are of dehumanization and suffering, students’ objections about racial slurs are but the tip of the iceberg. Much the same can be said for any other marginalized group in our country.

When we teach Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, To Kill a Mockingbird, and other classics of American literature, do we provide room for contemporary voices? What would it mean to pair Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass with selected excerpts from Huckleberry Finn? How about teaching the Scottsboro trial and screening speeches from Civil Rights–era thinkers during our To Kill a Mockingbird literature units (Thomas, Reese, and Lesesne). Or is it time to revisit the canon completely, rethinking how we tacitly narrate our national story through the literature that we teach? Our collective answers to these questions have significance not only for the contemporary moment but also for English teaching and learning in the decades to come.

Works Cited


Thomas, Ebony Elizabeth. “We’re Saying the Same Thing”: How English Teachers Negotiated Solidarity, Identity, and Ethics through Talk and Interaction, dissertation, University of Michigan, 2010, hdl.handle.net/2027.42/77791.


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