

**Black,
White &
Huckleberry
Finn**

**Re-imagining
the American
Dream**

**ELAINE MENSCH &
HARRY MENSCH**

Black, White,
and *Huckleberry Finn*

Re-imagining the American Dream

Elaine Mensh and Harry Mensh

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Introduction

Imagine that you enter a parlor. You come late. When you arrive, others have long preceded you, and they are engaged in a heated discussion, a discussion too heated for them to pause and tell you exactly what it is about. . . . You listen for a while, until you decide that you have caught the tenor of the argument; then you put in your oar. Someone answers; you answer him; another comes to your defense; another aligns himself against you, to either the embarrassment or gratification of your opponent, depending upon the quality of your ally's assistance. However, the discussion is interminable. The hour grows late, you must depart. And you do depart, with the discussion still vigorously in progress.¹

This scene was conceived, in 1941, by a prominent literary critic as an allegory for the discussion, pursued unendingly by Americans from generation to generation, on culture. The scene appears to represent an exemplary discussion—intense, open. Upon reflection, though, questions arise. Perhaps, rather than serving as a parable for the American cultural discussion, the scene is a rendering of the discussion the critic took part in. Or, to be even more exact, a rendering of that discussion from the critic's perspective.

For, considered from a different perspective, the dialogue's openness turns out to be, if not illusory, at least severely circumscribed. After all, you do not enter a parlor without an invitation. Moreover,

you are apt to be invited into the parlor only if you have achieved a certain status. While the connection between social class and participation in the discussion is clear, that between gender and participation is less so. Although a parlor is compatible with the presence of women, the critic's use of a male pronoun to denote the participants suggests a distinction between presence and participation. But whatever ambiguities attach to gender, none attaches to race: in that era, choosing a parlor as the metaphorical site of the cultural dialogue implied that the color line would be drawn at the door.

We do not mean to suggest, we must hastily add, that the critic chose the site with this consideration in mind; on the contrary, he was surely unaware of the way in which his metaphor mirrored the era's cultural conversation—or, rather, a dominant part of it. Beyond its boundaries lay another, a vital, part of the discussion. To bring this part into focus, let us do two things: keep the metaphorical premises, while changing “you” from a designation for those included to one for those excluded—African Americans of both genders:

If you are not guests in the parlor, it is not because you came late; on the contrary, you long preceded most of those already there. Had you entered, you would not have had to wait to learn what the discussion was about. You caught the tenor long ago. And, time and again, you put in your oar. Yet the sound it made, coming as it did from the outside, went for the most part unheard or unheeded by those inside. But however late the hour, you did not depart. As the forties moved into the fifties, you were still seldom a guest in the parlor. As the fifties moved on, though, what you said from the outside was being heard even in the parlor—including what you had to say about an American literary classic.

As time went on, you increasingly entered the debate over the classic from the inside as well as the outside. And as the debate continued, it became ever more evident that the argument over fictional black-white relations was also an argument over nonfictional black-white relations: over black images in white minds, unequal authority along racial lines, conflicting perceptions of black-white amity, and—because of the classic's unique place in the national consciousness—differing interpretations of the American dream.

I

The Trespassers

I

On September 4, 1957, National Guard troops ringed Little Rock's Central High School, which had been ordered to desegregate. They had been called up by the governor, who predicted, or promised, that "blood would run in the streets" if black children tried to enter. When eight of the children arrived, accompanied by two black and two white clergymen, they were confronted by the troops and a howling mob of men and women. The children were pushed and shoved, then informed by a National Guard captain that on orders of the governor they would not be allowed to enter. Escorted by the president of the State Conference of NAACP branches, a black woman, the children proceeded to the offices of the United States Attorney and the FBI.¹

A ninth child had not been informed that the students were to come as a group. When she arrived alone, there were shouts from the mob, which now numbered about five hundred: "They're here! The niggers are coming!" "Get her! Lynch her!" The student tried several times to pass through the troops; on her last try, she was stopped with bayonets. The mob yelled, "No nigger bitch is going to get in our school." With the troops standing by impassively, someone screamed, "Get a rope and drag her over to this tree." A white-haired woman fought her way through the mob, shouting: "Leave this child alone! Why are you tormenting her? Six months from now you will hang

your heads in shame." The mob hollered, "Another nigger-lover. Get out of here!"

The woman, a professor at a Little Rock college, stayed with the child until she could get her away on a bus. Joining with her to protect the child during the wait was the *New York Times* education editor, who was threatened as a "dirty New York Jew." In the next weeks, there were attacks on black men and women and on their homes, as well as assaults on black and white journalists. Finally, confronted with the Little Rock black community, which refused to surrender to the authorities or the mob, and also challenged by national and world opinion, the president acted to enforce the desegregation order; he federalized the Arkansas National Guard and directed the secretary of defense to send in regular troops as needed.²

The incident at Little Rock had myriad consequences, explicit and tacit. One of the latter appears to be an action taken by the New York Board of Education. Just eight days after the confrontation at Central High, the *New York Times* reported, in a front-page story, that the board had "quietly dropped" *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* from approved textbook lists for elementary and junior high schools. The novel, the *Times* also related, could still be purchased for school libraries and used as a textbook in high schools. The story linked the board's action to objections from the NAACP. The NAACP denied having protested to the board, but acknowledged that it "strongly objected to the 'racial slurs' and 'belittling racial designations' in Mark Twain's works."³

Although there is no evidence that the NAACP protested directly to the board, objections from one or another source certainly reached the board. But the official in charge of curriculum development stated that no objections had come to her attention. She said the novel had been taken off the approved textbook list because, as the *Times* put it, it was "not really a textbook."⁴ In giving this explanation, which was notable only for its surrealism (a book approved as a textbook was removed for not being a textbook), New York City school officials apparently believed they had converted a controversial move into an administrative correction, and so could escape responsibility for their own action.⁵

That there was little resemblance between an official story and the truth is hardly news, but the extreme ineptitude revealed in this story raises questions. Why was the board of education so utterly unprepared to offer even a remotely credible, let alone factual, explanation for its action on *Huck Finn*? One answer seems to be that school officials had been readied for the wrong battle, that is, for a skirmish essentially won by the time *Huck Finn* became required reading.

II

"Once we understand how they arose, we no longer see literary canons as *objets trouvés* washed up on the beach of history," observes Henry Louis Gates, Jr.⁶ The point is aptly illustrated by *Huckleberry Finn*'s journey into the schools' literary canon. The journey, which spanned more than two decades, began with a study whose stated aim was to determine "the most effective ways of utilizing" the novel in junior high schools.⁷ The study was followed, in 1931, by an edition published especially for junior high schools. In the introduction, the editors—speaking with the quaintness then deemed appropriate for addressing children—wrote: "In those early days Huck had but one friend who dared openly to seek his company, . . . Tom Sawyer. But today how different! . . . Then the parents tabooed Huck as a companion for their sons, but today the most respected of mothers open their doors to welcome in this wanderer."⁸

Since these lines descend from a supposedly more innocent time, it might seem they really were intended for children. But not only is it quite illogical to expect that children would be delighted by Huck's newfound respectability, it also seems odd to contrast the novel's respectability in the eyes of real parents with Huck's lack of it with fictional ones. Clearly, when the editors spoke of Huck's ostracism in his "early days," they had in mind not Huck's status in *Tom Sawyer*, but *Huck Finn*'s expulsion from the Concord Public Library in 1885 as the "veriest trash," "rough, coarse, and inelegant,"⁹ unfit for "our pure-minded lads and lasses,"¹⁰ and the copycat expulsions that followed.

The editors were Emily Fanning Barry, an English teacher at

Teachers College, and Herbert B. Bruner, who headed its Curriculum Construction Laboratory. Under the aegis of the publisher, Harper & Brothers, they conducted the study, which involved “thousands” of reports obtained from an unspecified number of teachers and pupils. The editors describe the student participants according to class, nationality, and location. Since they do not mention race, it is quite safe to assume “children” meant “white children.”¹¹

That this study undoubtedly included white children only does not mean the editors consciously sought to exclude black children. Their apparent absence from the study simply mirrored the exclusion of blacks from vast areas of American life. And even if the editors had been amazingly ahead of their time and wondered how black children might feel about *Huck Finn*, there would have been no reason to pursue the daring thought. Certainly it would have had no value for the publisher, given that black schools were likely to receive books handed down from white ones.

While the study, the classroom edition, and growing support from educators laid the groundwork for *Huck Finn* to become required reading, something more was needed to bring the effort to fruition. This arrived in the form of essays by Lionel Trilling (1948) and T. S. Eliot (1950) that provided the novel with the “academic respectability and clout” that assured its entry into the nation’s classrooms, points out Peaches Henry.¹² Trilling, who launched what Jonathan Arac calls the “hypercanonization” of *Huck Finn*,¹³ spoke of it as “one of the world’s great books and one of the central documents of American culture.”¹⁴ Eliot termed it a “masterpiece.”¹⁵ Both, however, were concerned with defending it against the by now largely anachronistic morality charge. Eliot made the point fairly subtly by stating he had not read the book as a boy because his parents considered it unsuitable, while he also spoke of things in it that would delight boys. The matter is, though, handled quite explicitly by Trilling, who remarks that Huck is “really a very respectable person.”¹⁶

Trilling also explicitly defended the novel against the “subversion of morality” charge. *Huck Finn*, he wrote, is “indeed a subversive book—no one who reads thoughtfully the dialectic of Huck’s great moral crisis will ever again be wholly able to accept without some

question" the "assumptions of the respectable morality by which he lives," nor see any distinction between the supposed "dictates of moral reason" and the "engrained customary beliefs of his time and place."¹⁷ In Trilling's essay, engrained customary beliefs did not include whites' attitudes toward blacks; perfunctory in his approach to slavery, he was oblivious of its legacy.

As for the educators who advocated *Huck Finn* for the classroom, they surely believed they were taking a bold step to replace vapid children's books with a novel of many wonders. The wonders of the river. The wonder of a fictional boy whose voice "strikes the ear with the freshness of a real boy talking out loud."¹⁸ A boy who is not merely a "bad boy" in the old, conventional sense, but one who can beat the grownups at their own dangerous games. So there seemed to be something in *Huck Finn* for every child. But there were also things the decision makers had not noticed. Nor did they seem to notice that, as time went on, racial matters had entered a state of acute flux, while their decision-making process had remained static, that is, monoracial.

The effort to establish *Huck Finn* as required reading, launched at a time of de jure segregation, culminated when this form of segregation had suffered a major blow. The novel's "entrenchment in the English curricula of junior and senior high schools coincided" with the decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*. Thus "desegregation and the civil rights movement deposited Huck in the midst of American literature classes which were no longer composed of white children only, but now were dotted with black youngsters as well," notes Henry. These youngsters, whose opinions of the novel had previously evoked zero interest, would soon become *Huck Finn's* "most persistent and formidable foe."¹⁹

III

The day after it reported the New York Board of Education's action on *Huckleberry Finn*, the *Times* ran an editorial, "Huck Finn's Friend Jim." It described the novel as "one of the deadliest satires" ever written on "some of the nonsense that goes on with the inequal-

ity of races." Although the black character is introduced as "Miss Watson's big nigger, named Jim," that "was the Missouri vernacular of that day." Moreover, Jim is a "warm human being, lovable and admirable," whose goodness causes Huck to tear up his letter telling Jim's owner where to find her runaway slave. By contrast, the "swindlers, members of mobs and feudists" are white. "One might go so far as to say that *Huckleberry Finn* is not fair to white people. It should, nevertheless, be available for use in New York schools." The editorial added: "One is not so certain about the Central High School of Little Rock, Ark."²⁰

The *Times* did not explain why it cast doubt on Central High as a place for *Huck Finn*; evidently it considered the point so obvious that no explanation was needed. In retrospect, though, the meaning seems clouded. Was the editorial saying that "one of the deadliest satires" ever written on the "nonsense that goes on with the inequality of races" had no place in a Little Rock school? One doubts that was the intent. Nor does it seem likely that the editors were actually concerned about Twain's presumably unfair treatment of whites; on the other hand, they surely realized there might be a different reaction in Arkansas, which is home to some of *Huck Finn*'s most disreputable and violent characters.²¹ In any case, perhaps the editors simply meant to imply that it would be impossible to teach *Huck Finn* at Central High during the eruption, given that the epithet used in the book was also being shouted just outside the classrooms.

Other aspects of the editorial also raise questions. Was it accurate to suggest, as it seems to do, an unequivocal distinction between Little Rock and New York? After all, the epithet that the editors describe as the "Missouri vernacular of that day" was also current, not only in Little Rock but, albeit unsanctioned, nationally. And what exactly was meant by "vernacular"? If "nigger" had been no more than an idiomatic expression in the slaveholding states, at what point did it acquire its contemporary meaning? And why were the editors so certain Mark Twain considered the epithet a mere colloquialism?

In any event, the assertion that the use of "nigger" in *Huck Finn* was merely the vernacular of that time appears to have been an after-

the-fact justification. Before desegregation, when white teachers taught the novel exclusively to white students, school officials displayed no curiosity over the students' seeming lack of difficulty with the epithet. But what did the white children really make of it? Had their parents explained it was the rawest, most debasing word in the language? Told them it was a word nice people didn't use? Or provided models for their children by using the epithet themselves? And the teachers? How did they respond to unseemly reactions from students? The public silence ended only when African-American children, having entered schools where they were not wanted, encountered the epithet in the classroom and protested—with predictable results.

"Why is it so obvious to so many authorities that [African-American parents' and students'] complaints cannot be taken seriously?" inquires Arac.²² Among those who dismiss their objections is a professor of English, Joan DelFattore, who, in 1992, pointed to *Huckleberry Finn*'s "ignorant, hypocritical, and narrow-minded slaveowners" and asserted: "Realistically, what should students think such people would say? 'Invite the African Americans to come in from the fields?'"²³

If "nigger" were used only by the novel's slaveowners, little comment would be needed. The word is, though, used by almost every character (including black ones), as well as by a narrator who long ago entered our national mythology. That *Huck Finn* is not a book in which the epithet is confined to characters the reader is meant to dislike is reflective of its complexity. The question, though, is not whether Twain should have dispensed with the epithet (he could not have written the novel without it), but whether its ubiquitous use can be justified by one or another historicist or literary defense (as antebellum vernacular, as a synonym for "slave," as Twain's irony).

Blacks have also been derided for their objections to Jim. In what literary historian Donald B. Gibson described in 1968 as a "characteristic" response,²⁴ Edward Wagenknecht declared: "When Negroes object to Jim . . . one can only regret that they are behaving as stupidly as white folks often do, for surely Jim is one of the noblest characters in American literature."²⁵ This comment was made in 1961.

More than a decade later, Andrew Solomon asserted: "Though often camouflaged by a minstrel-show exterior, Jim generally gleams through as a sublime creation, and those black readers who are repelled by Jim's external tendencies to stereotype might well ponder . . . Wagenknecht's remark."²⁶ And a decade after that, Laurence B. Holland spoke of those "skinned in white" in Concord who did not or do not "want their children to know about young Huck Finn," and contemporary "collegians skinned in black who do not see, created in the antics of the Negro Jim, the aspirations of a people and the stature of a man."²⁷

Thus, according to these and numerous other critics, the issue was not the black challenges to a black character but the challengers' inability to comprehend what was so obvious to the critics: that Jim is a representative black figure.

IV

The attribution of African Americans' criticisms of *Huck Finn* to a lack of comprehension is accompanied by a seemingly unrelated charge, that the black challengers are "left-wing censors." Among those who make the accusation is DelFattore: "The power of left-wing censors is best illustrated by the treatment of *Huckleberry Finn*, which has become one of the most frequently challenged works taught in secondary schools. Fundamentalists occasionally oppose the novel's portrayal of religion and its glorification of moral independence, but most of its opponents attack its racist language, particularly the word *nigger*."²⁸ It would be surprising, not to say distressing, if concern about the effect of "nigger" in the classroom existed only on the Left. If, however, the challenges to the novel are the work of left-wing censors, they can be dismissed as outside interference, of no concern to school officials. No documentation, though, is provided to support the claim, which seems to rest on the silent assumption that black students and parents are incapable of acting on their own.

While the left-wing censors are unnamed, the NAACP has been

one of those so classified. The censorship charge, though, is hardly sustained by the record, which tells us only that the NAACP objected to the “racial slurs” in Mark Twain’s works. But if one assumes, despite its denials, that the organization conveyed to the board of education its objections to *Huck Finn* as required reading, one is left with a question: would this act constitute censorship? As for the NAACP’s subsequent role, in 1982 it changed its position from objection to praise of *Huck Finn*. However, the organization stressed that the way the novel was taught resulted in the “humiliation” of black children, and it urged that teachers be “trained to handle potentially sensitive areas” before it was placed on required reading lists.²⁹ Another organization that DelFattore implicitly associates with the censorship charge is the Council on Interracial Books for Children.³⁰ While the council was sharply critical of *Huckleberry Finn*, it did not oppose the novel’s inclusion in the curriculum; instead it offered guidelines for teaching it. The council appears to be inactive.³¹ Although there seem to be no national organizations expressing objections to *Huck Finn* as required reading, the protests have continued.

The NAACP’s 1957 protest against *Huck Finn*’s “racial slurs” was undoubtedly made in response to complaints from parents. In the following decades, challenges have come from small local groups of parents or individual parents acting on behalf of or with their children, occasionally with the support of school administrators and teachers (including in some instances white ones);³² in one school, an administrator took the initiative.³³ Scattered and sporadic, the challenges have come from such places as Davenport, Iowa; State College and Warrington, Pennsylvania; Waukegan, Springfield, and Winnetka, Illinois; Deland, Florida; and Houston, Plano, and Lewisville, Texas. (In Lewisville the “Objector” is described as “Student, with his mother.”)³⁴ A challenge has also come from the Pennsylvania State Conference of the NAACP.³⁵ These protests are met with what Arac calls the “structure of idolatry—that is, the assault by the establishment when African Americans challenge the prestige of *Huckleberry Finn*.” The “standard pattern is for journalists to draw authority from scholars” to put down the parents and children.³⁶

V

In 1993, Allen Carey-Webb reported on *Huck Finn*'s status in the schools:

Praised by our best known critics and writers, the novel is enshrined at the center of the American-literature curriculum. . . . [T]he work is second only to Shakespeare in the frequency with which it appears in the classroom, required in seventy percent of public high schools and seventy-six percent 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.³⁷

Commenting on why African Americans continue to challenge the novel's use in the classroom, despite seemingly implacable resistance, Carey-Webb states:

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, *Huckleberry Finn* has a peculiar visibility. The novel remains the only one in the common “canon” 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, and 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.³⁸

If one judges the impact of the challenges to *Huck Finn* by its status in the schools, one could easily dismiss them. They have, though, been felt in less apparent but extremely significant ways. For