**The Words of Pap Finn’s Rant**



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Racism is ugly. The history and legacies of American racism are our nation’s own peculiar brand of ugly -- and the n-word embodies it.

It is the persistence of racism in America that makes the n-word in Huck Finn a problem in the classroom.

To understand how racism works in America it is necessary to understand how this word has been used to inflict pain on black people, challenge their humanity, and undercut their achievements. Leading black writers in America from Frederick Douglass to Ralph Ellison have understood this: to criticize racism effectively you have to make your reader hear how racists sound in all their offensive ugliness. When Malcolm X famously asked, “What do you call a black man with a Ph.D.?” and answered “Nigger,” he was testifying to the destructive power of this word and the world view it embodied.

Malcolm X’s quip echoes a key passage in Huckleberry Finn, where Twain uses the n-word to the same end. I have in mind the moment when Pap Finn, drunk and covered with mud, delivers this rant:

There was a free nigger there from Ohio — a mulatter, most as white as a white man. He had the whitest shirt on you ever see, too….They said he was a p’fessor in a college, and could talk all kinds of languages, and knowed everything. And that ain’t the wust. They said he could VOTE when he was at home. Well, that let me out. Thinks I, what is the country a-coming to? It was ’lection day, and I was just about to go and vote myself if I warn’t too drunk to get there; but when they told me there was a State in this country where they’d let that nigger vote, I drawed out. I says I’ll never vote agin….And to see the cool way of that nigger — why, he wouldn’t a give me the road if I hadn’t shoved him out o’ the way. I says to the people, why ain’t this nigger put up at auction and sold? — that’s what I want to know. And what do you reckon they said? Why, they said he couldn’t be sold till he’d been in the State six months.

The n-word is key to this rant. It underlines the irony involved: a repulsive, illiterate, alcoholic child-abuser is incensed not only that a well-educated, well-dressed free black man could vote in another state, but that he couldn’t be sold into slavery until he’d been in Missouri for six months!

Twain once wrote that “The difference between the almost right word & the right word is really a large matter -- it is the difference between the lightning bug and the lightning.” He chose his words with care. The “new edition" of Huck Finn is not new (John Wallace published an edition that substituted “slave” for the n-word over 25 years ago); and it is not Huck Finn.

It is the persistence of racism in America that makes the n-word in Huck Finn a problem in the classroom. We need to give teachers the tools they need to teach Twain’s book in the context of the history of racism in this country that is its central concern.