The Misreading of Literature
Context, Would-Be Censors, and Critics
by Michelle Marder Khami

In dismissing Peck's fundamentally moral book as immoral simply because it contains cura-... words, the irate father, like countless other would-be censors in America, past and present, has demonstrated a failure in overall comprehension of the text. Such individuals erroneously take isolated verbal snippets to denote the book's entire meaning. They are not wholly illit-... to the strictest sense of the word, for they can read. But neither are they truly literate, in the fullest sense of the word, for they do not know how to read literature. In the most extreme cases, not infrequent, they do not even bother to read the entire work they would ban. The inter-...ative, evaluative context such would-be censors bring to bear is limited to their own personal life experience and value system. Not understanding that the author's meaning is to be discovered in his context, not their own, these "alternate" readers disregard the relation of each passage to the literary work as a whole, to the text created by the writer. Thus the rich realm of expression constituted by creative writing essentially eludes them, because in its best it communicates indirectly —by suggestion and implication (both of which are highly dependent on the imaginary or fictional context)—rather than directly, literally, and explicitly.

The Catcher in the Rye
A contemporary classic frequently and hila-...rously banned by would-be censors is J.D. Salin-...er's The Catcher in the Rye—the "most censored item" in U.S. educational institutions banned by the book might have been measured by its mes-...e, if only he could have perceived it. For the book powerfully affirms to borrow the words of another, more approving parent: "the value of a man as a man, regardless of education, wealth, or social status."

If the angry father's preposterous misreading of the book were an isolated case, it might not be worth discussing. It is, however, as Delsbored English teachers and librarians in this country well know, all too common. And what it reveals about the poverty of our general culture goes far beyond any indictment the parent's errors of grammar and punctuation might prompt with respect to the American educational system's failure to teach basic skills.

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To each literary readers, protagonist Holden Caulfield's notorious lament "If you had a million years to do it in, you couldn't rub it out even if the Huck you signs in the world," is like a red cloth waved below in hell. All literate readers cannot see beyond, or bring to, the "T world" to grasp the full meaning of Holden's protest. His statement (fundamentally the most that he broadened of the book's many "objectionable" passages), far from being obscene in its intent, is a plea against obscenity. What Salinger is telling us, implicitly, is that Holden desperately wants to elude obscenity from his world.

We're in Holden's narrative—in essence a cry for decency, sincerity, and love in what he sees as an obscene, hypocritical, and uncaring world—so often restricted on grounds of obscenity and profanity merely because it employs obscene and profane language. Because too many Americans, even among the "educated," have not learned how language and form in literature function to convey more than literal meaning, the profoundest levels of meaning of a literary work relate to the work's form, style, and specific language. Huckleberry Finn

There is no other work of American fiction the author's choice of language more essential to the heart of his meaning than in Mark Twain's Adventures of Huckleberry Finn. And the trouble that book had, before being obscene in its intent, is an appeal to the persistent and pervasive allusion in Huckleberry Finn.

Soon after its publication, Huckleberry Finn was banned from the shelves of the Connecticut Board of Public Libraries. In 1922, the board summarily rejected the book as "trash of the veriest sort," according to the report in a Boston newspaper.

What the Concord trustees (much like the members of the Board of Education in The Days Our Boys Would Die and The Cattle in the Far in our own day) overlooked was that beneath the surface banality and irreverence of Huckleberry Finn is a profound concern for authentic moral values. As Twain succinctly characterized his book a decade earlier, it is a story in which "a sound heart and a deformed conscience comes into collision and conscience suffers defeat." By "a deformed conscience" Twain meant the often cruel, hypocritical, social and moral conventions of the society depicted. "A sound heart" refers to Huck's innate good will, which prompts him to overcome their limitations. Early in the narrative (ch. 3), for instance, Huck rejects, on his own typically sensible grounds, the conventional ethic preached by the widow Douglas.

She told me... I must do everything I could for other people, and look out for them all the time, and never think about myself... But I couldn't see no advantage about it except for the other people—so at last I reckoned I wouldn't worry about it any more, but just let it go.

Sidestepping the widow's exhortations to altruism (apparently because it seems quite natural to him that his duty to himself (and his self-interest) does not prevent Huck from feeling, and acting on, a deep concern for others, however, when the individual's virtue and his own sense of justice warrant it. Indeed, he later picks both his skin and his bea,le, eternal damnation as well, to save the runaway Jim, who has become his friend. At the moment when the "deformed conscience" of a beggarly,越是, prompted Huck to save his soul by writing a letter portraying Jim, Huck's "sound heart" proves a better moral guide. Recalling the many times Jim has been a genuine, loyal, and loving friend, Huck confesses to the reader: "I couldn't seem to strike no place to hang me against him." Trimming up the fatal letter he has written, he resolves, in what has been taken as the dramatic climax of this loosely constructed novel: "All right then, I'll go to hell" (ch. 3)—a statement meant more literally than figuratively.

Modern Misreadings While as I was deeply moved by a familiar reminder to estimable children, I should not be able to explain the wide gaps between the book's original reading and the modern versions. Huckleberry Finn is now perceived by many educators, writers, and parents as insulting to blacks and, by some feminist-minded critics, to women as well. As summarized in an editorial in the Bulletin of the Council on Interracial Books for Children (a private agency devoted to counteracting bias in children's books), the principal objection is that the novel "attacks the condition of being Black." More specifically, there is concern that Jim is an embarrassing and negative role model for Black children and a source of racial amusement for white readers. Thus the CBC devoted a double issue (Vol. 15 [1986]), No. 3 to a pamphlet in its bimonthly Bulletin to the question of how (and when) Huckleberry Finn should be taught, focusing on how the problem of racism should be addressed. As though the novel's alleged racism were not trouble enough, in that same issue a feminist historiographer further charged that the book reflected the "women's profound misogyny.

While there is not space here to examine in detail all the spurious arguments mar- shaled against Huckleberry Finn, a few examples will illustrate how the short sighted focus on single issues—gives blind to the relevance of literary and his- torical context—can result in an egregious misreading of literature, even by those who surely ought to know better:

Twain's alleged antifeminism is most easily disposed of: Critics who see misogyny in Huckleberry Finn commonly mistake a few of the novel's female characters to be representative of the author's view of women in general. (The feminist historian writing in the CBC Bulletin, for instance, saw Miss Watson and Aunt Sally as Twain's prototypes of the narrow, mean, anti-social, anti- free, anti-humans female.) Huck's different responses to the various female characters in the novel belies this kind of generalized interpretation, however.

Huck clearly distinguishes between Miss Watson and the widow Douglass, for example, even as they are both trying to reform him. Recalling the aftermath of an adventure with Tom Sawyer, from which he returned "all greased up and clayey," Huck rebukes ch. 3: "I ain't no good going over in the morning, from old Miss Watson, on account of my clothes, but the widow ain't. She gave me the grace and claye and looked so sorry that I fought I would behave a while if I could."

It seems that the widow would talk to him in a way Tom's mother would not, but she would not "make a body's mouth water" but then Miss Watson would "kick it all down again." He concludes that there were two Providences, and a poor church would stand considerable drier with the widow of providence, but if Miss Watson's got him there wasn't no help for him any more.

Miss Watson is instead depicted as a cool, controlling, punishing woman—who would not deter Huck's (at times) affection. The widow Douglass, on the other hand, is so kind and loving toward Huck that, despite his deference with her efforts to "civilize" him, he is moved to "behave a while" if he could and would even like, he subsequently adds, to "belong to" her Providence.

More generally, as ch. 28, Huck is so filled with admiration for another of the novel's females—Mary Jane Wilson ("she had more sand in her than any girl I ever seen")—that he risks his own safety to help her recover her inheritance. Huck's actions here not only further controverts the
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charge of Twain’s misuse of words emphati-
cally gives us the lie to another, more
nuanced role of Huck as a narrator. Huck
personifies and glorifies total irresponsibility as a notion as popular among
readers as among those of u.s. (indeed, de-
tectors). Huck actually behaves very respon-
sibly, taking people, in the course of his
thoughts about people like Mary Wink and Jim. In
is simply that his sense of responsibility springs
more urgenly from his own personal
needs, values, and affections than from the
distances of society.

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The Right Words

What, then, of the alleged racism in the novel?
Such charges–like those against A
Day No Pig Would Die and The Catcher in the
Rye–focuss largely on questions of
language. The frequent use of the
pejorative term “nigger” is seen as
particularly offensive. Significantly, those
who interpret this use as evidence of
Twain’s “racist” manner of thinking
reflecting attitudes and assumptions of his
fictional characters, generally fail to
recognize that the language of the novel
reflects “nigger” and “colored” in other contexts. Most important, they fail to
acknowledge that, deprecating epithets aside, Twain depicts the novel’s principal
black character, Jim, as witty, admirable
more than most of the novel’s white characters
who populate the book is mostly crew of
“industrious, drug-sellers, hypochrites,
looseheads, boors, rasps, deadbeats,
scoundrels, hucksters, and niggers.”
As to the novel’s language, it is
roughly as close to the language used by
Huckleberry Finn has included criticism of
the “exaggerated dialect” spoken by Jim.
As an article in the CBCR Bulletin argues, for
example, that Twain based this “mock
black dialect” on minstrelsy traditions of
caricature and ridicule rather than
on direct observation of the actual black speech
of the day. Indeed, it criticizes the argument, a
seemingly regrettable letter Twain wrote in 1874,
when he was working on The
Adventures of Tom Sawyer—a decade in time
and light years in literary strategy and
nuance–before the completion of Huckleberry Finn.

This curious example exemplifies two
common pitfalls of literary interpretation:
first, the tendency to see an author’s work
and thought as monolithically uniform (an
especially insidious fallacy, denying as it
does the possibility of individual growth
and change); and second, the inappropriate
use of external historical evidence to
interpret a literary text (such external evidence is transitory, at any rate, with
the internal evidence of the text).

To understand the use of language in
Huckleberry Finn, one might begin with
what Twain himself said in his explanatory
note (preceding ch. 12), in which he
points to seven distinct varieties of dialect
discussed in the book among them, ‘the
Missouri negro dialect.’ The shapers for
not having been done in a haphazard
manner,” he emphasizes, “but pains-
takingly, and with the trustworthy
accuracy and support of personal
experience.” Twain’s claim to have given
special attention to the matter of idiom is
coordinated with comparisons of the
published text of Huckleberry Finn with
extant manuscript pages. Thousands of
changes in spelling and structure were
made—presumably to improve the
accuracy of the text as it was being
written. The full force and function of the
black dialect in Huckleberry Finn can be
demonstrated by comparison with dialogue
between Tom and Injun Joe:

“Can’t, Tom. Ole mas’lins told me to
get away, and if I don’t, I’ll go to
hell, and so I got to go,” Tom said.

“Long and low to my own business—
she’d look that I’d tend to the
whitewasher,” (ch. 12).

In Huckleberry Finn, the fiction of Miss
Watson’s big nigger, named Jim, obviously
advances much further than standard
fictional speech as shown in Jim’s account of
his escape from Miss Watson’s:

“I’d made up my mind bout what I’d
say; I got to say the righted thing on
it, tryin’ to get away off, de dogs’d
track me; I shot a shot to cross over,
dez mos damn skittles, you see, en
you’d know bout whut I’d lan’ on de
yaller side en whet to pick up my

track. So I says, a ruff if whut it arter,
it don’t make no track,” (ch. 12).

Even if (as has been charged) Jim’s dialect
were nothing more than a caricature
of actual black speech—a caricature
conforming to white readers’ notions of blacks as stupid and ignorant—what is
significant here is the content of that
speech. That is, through reasoning through a
safe route of escape, Jim shows very
good sense. Similarly, the comic Pappy
Dreiser debate between Huck and Jim in
chapter 13, though the dialogue mimics
Dreiserian monologs, the humor, Jim’s
argument is, in fact, logically sounder than
Huck’s. Thus Twain clearly implies that
there is “much more to the ‘nigger’” than
his “ignorant” manner of speaking
suggests. In these instances, elsewhere in
the novel, the author subtly subverts
racist assumptions, as David L. Smith has
persuasively argued in an article in the
Mark Twain Journal (fall 1964).

Objectives to the racist terms and
substantial negro speech in Huckleberry Finn
bear a definite kinship to the objec-
tions formerly raised against the work’s
“coarse” expressions, “inverted” style, and
“systematic use of bad grammar.” Both
varieties of criticism are oblivious to the
author’s literary purpose. Twain’s use of
substantial and sometimes racist speech
in Huckleberry Finn—not only in the
dialogue portions but, more radically, in
Huck’s first-person narrative—was the
very deliberate choice of a seasoned writer,
engaging him to achieve an authenticity
and intimacy not otherwise possible. “If I
tell you the truth about the nigger,”

it is never worth printing, it comes
from the head not the heart. . . . For
it to be successful and worth printing,
the imagined boy would have to tell
his story himself and let me act merely
as his amanuensis.”

For Huck Finn, fourteen-year-old son of
the town drunkard, to “tell his story
honestly as an amanuensis” had to suspend the author’s customary standards of
grammar, spelling, and refined usage.

Again, comparison with Tom Sawyer is
illuminating. The content of several
passages in the two novels is so similar that
Twain seems to have deliberately
reworked the old material, transforming
the earlier work’s conventional third
person narrative through Huck’s boyish
vernacular. The transformation is most
striking in the long descriptions of dawn
in chapter 14 of Tom Sawyer and chapter 19
of Huckleberry Finn, as even brief
excerpts will show. (And both professional author’s carefully
written, rather formal description:

it was the cool gray dawn, and there
was a delicious sense of repose and
peace in the deep pervading calm and
silence around the town. Not a leaf stirred,
not a sound disturbed upon great
Nature’s meditation . . . .

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A short-sighted focus on single issues can result in an egregious misreading of literature, even by those who surely ought to know better.

but as his critics. Education columnist Fred M. Hechinger, for example, deplored attacks on the book, "The Negro Image," in the New York Times last year that Huck helps Jim escape "because he knows that making a slave of him of any human being is wrong." Huck, in fact, knows no such thing, and to claim that he does is to detract immediately from the power of Huck's fictional creation.

As Huck risks his own life and Jim's flight to freedom, he never actually questions the institution of slavery. On the contrary, when he resolves to "go to hell" rather than betray Jim, he truly believes he is "taking up wickedness again." Nor does Huck question the racist assumptions on which slavery rests. So he can say of Jim at one moment: "He was right; he was nearly always right and in the same breath ad-
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There is something especially disturbing about witnessing the misreading of such books—like seeing innocents misunderstood or, worse, accused of crimes they didn't commit. Sudden to think that parents would, and even go to think that educators could, out of ignorance or misguided zeal, teach children to regard such books not as the true friends they are but as foes.

Selected Bibliography

Acknowledgments
The author is grateful to a number of friends and colleagues who read an earlier draft of this article and offered their comments and suggestions, which proved most helpful. Particular thanks are due John Langfield Berkley, Distinuished Visiting Educator, Ohio University (Chillicothe), and Frank Ochsnann, Professor of English, Drew University, Madison, New Jersey.

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Michale Stedr Kamb has been studying the phenomenon of censorship pressures in the United States since 1965, when she served as the research assistant for a major nationwide survey sponsored by the American Library Association, the Association of American Publishers, and the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. She was the principal author of the survey report on how books and other learning materials are selected by public schools, and how and why they are sometimes removed. Her articles and views on this subject have appeared in *American Education, Education Work, and Educational Leadership,* among other publications, and she has spoken before professional groups concerned with the issue.

"Books Our Children Read"—Documentary Film
In addition to writing and speaking on the censorship issue, Michele Kamb conceived, produced, and directed a half-hour documentary film entitled "Books Our Children Read." The film, which was televised in the 1984 National Film Festival, explores how teachers and parents in one mid-American community (the Fort Frye Local School District in southeastern Ohio) constructively resolved their potentially explosive conflict over the books adolescents would read.

"Books Our Children Read" (26 min., color, 33 mm and 1/2" or 3/4" video, with accompanying study guide) is available for sale or rent. For information: 1-800-323-4223.

October 1986