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Huck Finn, Robot Jim and John Denver: Language, Young Man!

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Abstract

I'll be teaching a section of Civil War Era Studies 205, Intro to the Civil War Era at Gettysburg College this spring. I had been puzzling over my book list for the past month or two, trying to decide which tomes to assign to students who need an overview of the era and a firm grounding in the four Civil War historical schools: social, military, political and memory. While Drew Gilpin Faust and Charles Dew have drifted onto and off of and back onto my list as I've been planning, one firm holdout has always been *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain. Like all college survey courses (I believe it is required by Commonwealth of Pennsylvania charter), I needed to include the requisite novel. Instead of *Killer Angels* or *The March*, I've decided to punch my ticket with a primary source. [excerpt]

Keywords

CW150, Gettysburg, Gettysburg College, Civil War Era Studies, Civil War Interpretation, Black History

Disciplines

Cultural History | History | Public History | Social History | United States History

Comments

Interpreting the Civil War: Connecting the Civil War to the American Public is written by alum and adjunct professor, John Rudy. Each post is his own opinions, musings, discussions, and questions about the Civil War era, public history, historical interpretation, and the future of history. In his own words, it is "a blog talking about how we talk about a war where over 600,000 died, 4 million were freed and a nation forever changed. Meditating on interpretation, both theory and practice, at no charge to you."

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Interpreting the Civil War

Connecting the Civil War to the American Public

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Huck Finn, Robot Jim and John Denver: Language, Young Man!

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 1, 2011

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bc1BmG6rk0k&feature=player_embedded

The "book trailer" for a new edition of Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*.

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Samuel Langhorne Clemens' birthday was yesterday, so I've been thinking about him a lot over the past 24 hours. Clemens is this particularly troubling character for a modern viewer, specifically because of his transformation. In our age of denigrating flip-flopers and those who periodically reevaluate their views, Clemens strikes an odd chord. An unabashed racist in his youth, a true product of his surroundings, Clemens through the voice of the crafted character Twain overcame his prejudice and became one of the most ardent voices for social reform our nation has ever known.

It is this deep, inside-baseball understanding of the imbecility of the racist system of slavery which gives *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* its raw power. Twain turns the entire social order on its head through his use of language, through his subversion of words' meanings and through his conjunction of incongruent thoughts in Huck's simple yet profound mind. The language matters.

All of the above just stands as prologue as to why I am not assigning the NewSouth Books edition of the book. New South's edition, which replaces each use of "the n-word" with the word "slave," destroys the subversive meaning behind Twain's work. Twain's use of language, and his particularly crafted subversion of "the n-word", is critical to the plot of the novel and its deepest meanings. But "the n-word" has such deep and rightly-earned emotional baggage for America, no matter skin color or heritage, that many see *that word* as unprintable. But "the n-word" is necessary to fully understand Twain's meanings, that Jim is not simply an "n-word", a label attached by an oppressor, but a reasoning and thinking human being.

Did you see what I did there? Every time you got to "the n-word" in the above paragraph, what did your mind do? Did it fill in the blank? It is very similar to the psychological [phenomenon of pareidolia](#); your mind fills in the chaos with order. You subconsciously read "nigger" each time I wrote "n-word." Your mind will do the same thing to you when you listen to the John Denver song embedded at the right. This is the classic *Annie's Song*, but this is the version edited for airplay on national radio. Go ahead, click play. I'll wait right here.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4A9as5bQx6w&feature=player_embedded

Annie's Song... the radio edit.

Comedy duo [Gabriel Diani and Etta Devine](#) have created an alternate-alternate version of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, instead replacing "nigger" with "robot." The trailer for their book appears at the tops of this post. The replacement is as meaningless and simultaneously disastrous to the book as replacing it with "slave." The new-new edition is brilliant satire. Your brain will still fill in the word, but now it will be keenly attuned to the absurdity of the matter. The character of Robot Jim, fundamentally altering the entire meaning of the book for the base level comfort of the reader, is the most absurd concept possible and points to the fundamental problem with NewSouth's edition and schools' propensity to censor the book.

The word nigger should be retired, much as the Confederate Flag. Both are hateful symbols, at their core working to deny the humanity of a race of people. But likewise both should still be displayed where they can teach and educate as to their hatred. That means that we can still show the flag in museums, we can still talk about the tough stuff of history in a proper context. We should never call anyone a nigger again as an insult or an epithet. But we can say the word in the right time, place and manner. *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is one of those places. Here the word is displayed in all its hateful meaning, the fallacy of its concepts being slowly unveiled across the novel until finally Huck utters those words which show how absurd the word and its concept is. Jim becomes a man, not the sub-human concept characterized by the word "nigger".

Huck contemplates sending a note he has written to Jim's owner:

Miss Watson your runaway nigger Jim is down here two mile below Pikesville and Mr. Phelps has got him and he will give him up for the reward if you send. Huck Finn.

He hesitates. He realizes that he, "was the best friend old Jim ever had in the world, and the only one he's got now." Huck is left with the choice to either send the note or go to hell for trying to free his friend. His answer:

"All right, then, I'll go to hell"

And he tears up the note; he tears up *that word*. Which is more powerful, Huck tearing up "nigger" or tearing up "slave?"

...or maybe tearing up "robot" instead?