

Huck ... a racist?

"The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn" is in the news again — this time John Martin, the principal of Mark Twain (of all places) Intermediate School in Fairfax County, Va., has ordered the book removed from the school's curriculum. This time the novel by Samuel Clemens (alias Mark Twain) is being barred from a school under the accusation of racism.

Martin ordered the book removed after the school's racially mixed six-member faculty Human Relations Committee objected to "the flagrant use of the word 'nigger' and the demeaning way in which black people are portrayed" in the novel.

The last time "The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn" was under the threat of being banned — and in fact was banned from a number of high school libraries — was for the scenes when Huck and Jim (a runaway slave) are on the Mississippi River in a raft, and Jim, reaching out to Huck in the water, calls him "honey."

By the rampaging revisionists lately responsible for scouring classic novels (sort of neo-Bowdlerism) for moral infractions — for Jim to address Huck by the term "honey" is a definite intimation of homosexuality. It matters not to the neo-Bowdlerian moralists that there is little, if any, textual evidence of a homosexual relationship between Huck and Jim.

Twain's satirical novel puncturing racism and the mores of the south, by being banned for use of the term "nigger," is in the midst of its very own adventures. In either case, the charges of racism and homosexuality are nothing short of ridiculous. How can a novel written in the 19th century — defining the realities of a period in which there was slavery and racism was an accepted mode of behavior — survive unscathed a scrutiny from the pinnacle of our "enlightened times.?"

"The book is poison," John H. Wallace, a member of the Twain administration and the Human Relations Committee, said. "It is anti-American; it works against the melting-pot theory of our country; it works against the idea that all men are created equal; it works against the 14th Amendment to the Constitution and against the preamble that guarantees all men life, liberty and pursuit of happiness."

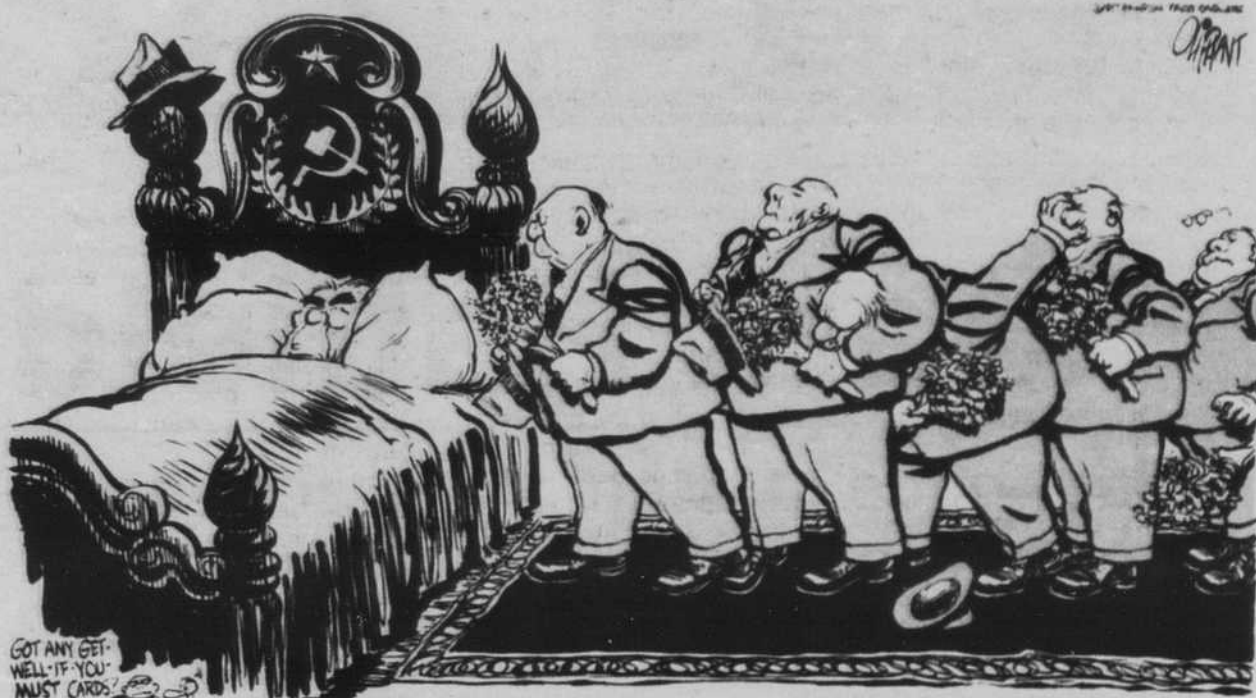
Wallace's contention (including his sexism) is patently absurd. There is validity to the use of the term "nigger," however offensive, in a literary description of black people if only to accurately establish a context. To follow Wallace's basis means that not just Twain's use of the term "nigger" is poisonous, but so is Langston Hughes, James Baldwin, Richard Wright, Leroi Jones, and the Last Poets (to name but a few). Yet, it is doubtful that similar criteria would be applied to the works of these authors. The use of the descriptive term "nigger" by Richard Wright in "The Invisible Man" is virtually the same as that of Twain. Neither use the term as would a racist.

The semantic tools of a language must remain free from revisionary factions. To diminish the extent of language diminishes the effectiveness of comprehension. "Nigger" is an offensive term to both blacks and whites. However, the understanding of the word "nigger" is quite different to blacks than to whites. The word is part of black vernacular, and used more in the form of a noun or pronoun. It's probably the most frequently used word in comedian Richard Pryor's act.

Principal Martin's banning of "Huckleberry Finn" has brought sharp criticism from education officials and the ACLU. However, the ACLU hasn't announced any action to counter the banning of the novel.

Chan Kendrick, executive director of the Virginia ACLU, summed the argument best, saying "There are scores of books offensive to one group or another which are recognized as being great pieces of literature. You need to read those books in their historical context."

To ban a book because of a word or scene that may be considered offensive to a group actually encroaches on the freedoms held for all. Censorship, be it prior to, or long after publication, is the most heinous act. Educators should not attempt to protect students from the realities of society, be they historical or contemporary.



sally hodgkinson editor's note

A cartoon logger, dressed in an orange workshirt, red suspenders, blue jeans and laced-up high-top boots, grins from the neon sign: Pour House Tavern.

About half of the parking lot is filled — mostly pickups and four-wheel drives. The bar is next door to the Wood Products Credit Union and a block from the main Weyerhaeuser plant in Springfield.

It's 9:30 on a Monday night and customers are sparse. Most are huddled around the pool tables. Twenty-two of 24 regular tables are empty.

"Whadja want?" the waitress asks a couple. She is dressed in tight designer jeans; a western shirt. "We got Bud, Miller, Schiltz. All the same price." Two bottles are ordered. "Wanta glass?" she asks the woman. After the waitress saunters away, the man chuckles. "She didn't ask me if I wanted a glass. Sexist."

"Goddam-you-son-of-a-bitch," one of the patrons roars from the vicinity of the pool tables. He grabs the work-shirt shoulder of his friend and shakes it, almost toppling the man.

Dolly Parton fades away in the background and is replaced by Paul McCartney. The music thumps out of the seven speakers then abruptly stops. "John, that was terrible," the waitress complains from behind the bar. "It sounds like a dentist's drill." McCartney is replaced by the Rolling Stones.

At one of the two tables being used, a

couple drains an pitcher of amber beer. The man, dressed in faded-but-clean levis, a navy blue sweater and a rust down vest, is doing most of the talking. Leaning forward, he gestures to emphasize a point. The music stops. "Chuck said he's been on unemployment for two or three weeks now and he says those bastards..." The music thumps again from the speakers.

His companion, a heavy-set woman dressed in a polyester, blue and white polka dotted shirt with a brown and orange blouse underneath, keeps nodding. The man leans forward again, and bangs his fist on the formica table top. She nods, looking away. Her hair is pulled into a tight knot at the nape of her neck that emphasizes her stoic face. Her lips move only to let beer pass through. Her head bobs again. She notices someone watching her, crosses her arms and looks back at her companion. And nods again.

The light in the bar is subdued. The paneling, ceiling, beams, part of the floor, chairs and bar are wood. Brick and the blinking video games are squatters in the tavern's wood decor. Horns from two long-dead five-point bucks are nailed to one of the crossbeams.

Outside, in the still, nippy air the neon logger glows. In the background, Weyerhaeuser lazily spits gray smoke into the dark night, it's light creating an almost science-fiction picture. The logger's happy-go-lucky grin seems out of place.

letters

Mankind

"I wish the professors at the University would have the sensitivity to include women in their language," declares Janet Brown (Emerald, 8 April). Women, though, are in fact included in "man or mankind."

In English — and several other languages — one word, "man," denotes all members of the human race, male and female, children and adults, as well as, in different contexts, adult males. Hence, in modern anthropology and biology, all members of the genus homo, of

which homo sapiens is the only species extant, are called "man." "Man," "mankind,"

Regardless of the "injustice," proper English grammar, in such contexts, "subsumes" sensitivity.

David Dole

staff

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