

## Should classic works of literature be edited to make them less offensive?

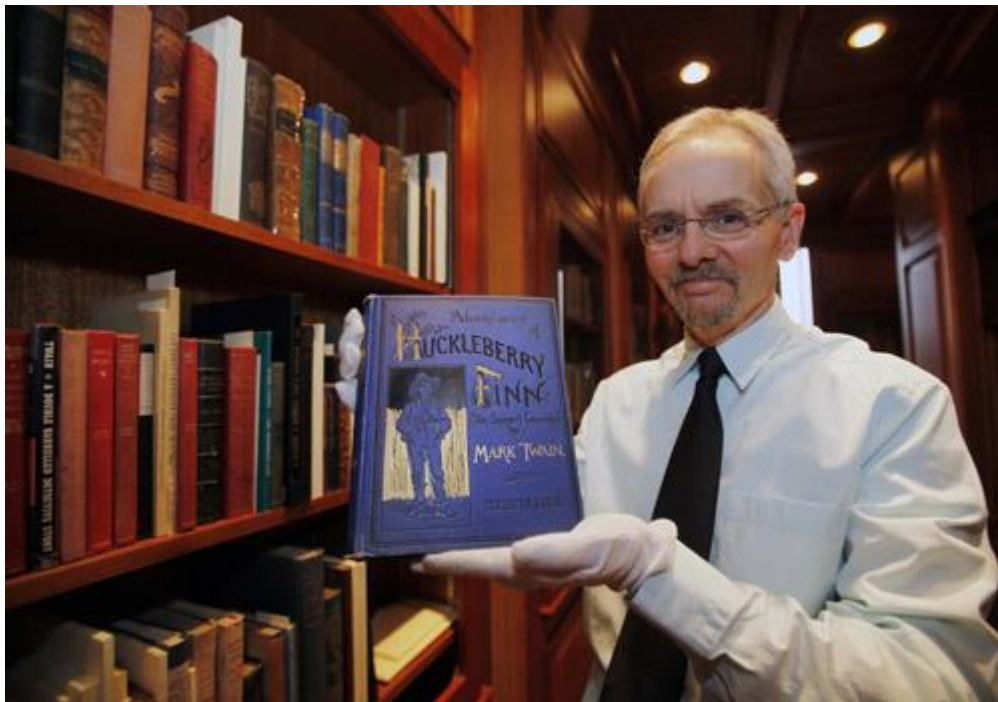
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### SUPPORTERS ARGUE

Classic yet controversial books, such as Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, should be altered so that young people can read them without becoming embroiled in the controversy regarding their content. Removing the n-word from *Huckleberry Finn*, for example, will allow people to explore the themes and messages of the book without becoming preoccupied with the appearance of a single word.

### OPPONENTS ARGUE

An author's words are carefully chosen; changing those words essentially changes the work itself. The new version of *Huckleberry Finn* illustrates that fact through its substitution of the n-word with the word "slave," which has a very different meaning. Removing controversial aspects of works like *Huckleberry Finn* deprives the reader of the opportunity to contend with dark periods in U.S. history.



**At the Mark Twain Library at Elmira College in upstate New York, Mark Twain archivist Mark Woodhouse holds a first edition of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.**

AP Photo/David Duprey

Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, first published in the U.S. in 1885, is one of the most lauded works of American literature. Pulitzer and Nobel Prize-winning 20th-century novelist Ernest Hemingway wrote in 1935, "All modern American literature comes from one book by Mark Twain called *Huckleberry Finn*.... All American writing comes from that. There was nothing before. There has been nothing as good since."

*Huckleberry Finn*, however, has been the subject of controversy since its initial publication, at which time critics felt that its depiction of the young protagonist's delinquent behavior would be a bad influence on children. Later, the book's racial overtones led some observers to consider it offensive. Indeed, *Huckleberry Finn* contains the racial slur "nigger," often referred to now as the "n-word," more than 200 times. Twain's reasons for using the word have been discussed and debated many times over the years, and the book remains regarded as a classic. [See [The N-Word](#)]

The website of the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) lists *Huckleberry Finn* as "among the most taught works of American literature" and reports that the book is studied in more than 70% of U.S. high schools. Many scholars, meanwhile, insist that the use of the n-word is a historical indication of how African Americans were treated and thought of in the 19th century. "Many scholars and teachers view Twain's language as an integral part of the story," National Public Radio (NPR) host Neal Conan explained in January 2011, "including words we know sometimes people find offensive."

In late 2010, publisher NewSouth Books announced that it would be releasing a revised version of *Huckleberry Finn*, along with its predecessor, Twain's *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, with the n-word edited out and replaced by the word "slave." The new version was edited by Alan Gribben, an English professor at Auburn University in Montgomery, Alabama, who felt that the use of the n-word in Twain's work had kept it from being read in many classrooms.

Gribben's edition of the books also replaces the word "Injun," a racial slur against American Indians, with the word "Indian." Because *Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn* are both in the public domain, meaning they are no longer protected by copyright law, publishers may alter and reprint them in any fashion they like.

The announcement of the edits drew a firestorm of controversy, with critics assailing what they considered censorship by Gribben and NewSouth. The outcry also highlighted broader questions about editing already-published works, with some critics asserting that, because Twain's original text and artistic vision had been altered, he was no longer the author of the new version of *Huckleberry Finn*.

The accusations of censorship leveled at Gribben are part of a long history of responses to controversial books in the U.S. Such works are typically not banned outright; rather, they are often "challenged," with libraries or schools refusing to carry or teach them. *Huckleberry Finn* has been among the most challenged books in the U.S. for years.

Should classic works of literature be edited to make them more acceptable? Do such changes constitute censorship, or do they merely make the books accessible to more people?

Supporters of editing the classics contend that some books, such as *Huckleberry Finn*, must be altered to be appreciated by a new generation. Those books, they say, were written in a different era. Editing out offensive material, supporters insist, will enable more young people to experience a classic work like *Huckleberry Finn*.

Critics of editing classic works, by contrast, argue that changing an author's words is tantamount to robbing that writer of authorship of his own work. A writer chooses particular words purposely, opponents say, and those words should not be changed. The word "slave" is not interchangeable with the n-word, critics point out, and substituting one word for the other changes the meaning of Twain's work.

## ***Huckleberry Finn*'s Controversial History**

The character of Huckleberry Finn, or Huck as he is often called, was first introduced to readers in *Tom Sawyer*, one of Twain's most popular novels, in 1876. The book featured the rambunctious youth Tom Sawyer embarking on a series of adventures with Huck, the son of an abusive drunk and described in the text as a "poor motherless thing."

Published eight years after *Tom Sawyer*, *Huckleberry Finn* is set in the antebellum South, around the 1840s, and is told in dialect from the first-person point of view of the title character. The story finds Huck running away from his

abusive father in St. Petersburg, Missouri. Huck fakes his own death and begins traveling down the Mississippi River. On a small island in the middle of the river, he meets Jim, a slave he and Tom know from town, who has escaped from his owner. The two decide to proceed north, up the Mississippi, to Ohio, a free state where Jim would be able to buy his family's freedom. The two embark on a series of adventures, at the end of which Jim is sold back into captivity. Huck decides to risk his life to free Jim, teaming with a returning Tom Sawyer to hatch a complicated rescue. Jim escapes but is again recaptured when he refuses to abandon an injured Tom. Huck and the reader then learn that Jim's owner, Mrs. Watson, has died, freeing Jim in her will. Tom was aware of that all along, but had opted not to tell Huck or Jim, hoping instead to have a fantastic adventure.

*Huckleberry Finn* is fraught with racial themes. In addition to using the n-word frequently to describe Jim, Huck considers himself evil for befriending Jim, who, as a slave, was regarded as inferior and subhuman by the racist standards of the time. Indeed, Huck's moral confusion reaches its climax when he decides to free Jim, accepting that act as an evil gesture that will probably result in his damnation.

When *Huckleberry Finn* was first published, criticism of the book did not focus on its use of racial slurs and portrayal of African Americans. Rather, Twain's critics in the 1800s felt that *Huckleberry Finn* encouraged bad behavior. In March 1885, the directors of the Concord Public Library in Massachusetts referred to the book as "flippant, irreverent, and trashy," Ben Click, an English professor at St. Mary's College in Maryland, noted in a lecture in November 2010. Click noted that one of the library committee's members said that the book "deals with a series of adventures of a very low grade of morality; it is couched in the language of a rough, ignorant dialect. . . . The whole book is of a class that is more profitable for the slums than it is for respectable people, and it is trash of the veriest sort."

Despite some early criticism of *Huckleberry Finn* for being vulgar or inappropriate, the book generally received rave reviews and was a tremendous commercial success. Click noted that, within six years of its release, "the book left its detractors behind." Still, despite agreement from many that *Huckleberry Finn* was a masterpiece, the novel remained under attack for years. "Censorship is telling a man he can't have a steak," Twain himself said of attempts to censor his work, "just because a baby can't chew it."

Over the years, many attempts were made to edit *Huckleberry Finn* to make it more palatable. According to Click, a 1951 revision substantially altered the text by removing Huck's dialect and fixing his poor grammar. That version changed the opening line of the novel from, "You don't know about me without you have read *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*," to "You don't know about me unless you have read *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*." Click noted that, in that edition, "Huck's entire voice is taken away from him."

*Huckleberry Finn* was first attacked for its alleged racism in the 1950s, during the civil rights movement. At that time, many schools and libraries had the book removed on the grounds that it was racially offensive.

Accusations that *Huckleberry Finn* was racist intensified in the 1980s, with more school districts and libraries banning the book. One of the most notable attacks came in 1982 from the Mark Twain Intermediate School in Fairfax County, Virginia, which removed the book from a required reading list. John Wallace, a member of the staff at the Twain School at the time said,

*[T]he book is poison. 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 [which made African Americans U.S. citizens in 1868] and against the preamble that guarantees all men life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.*

Wallace, who has also called *Huckleberry Finn* "the most grotesque example of racist trash ever written," released his own edited version of the book in the 1980s that, in addition to removing the n-word, eliminated all instances of the word "hell" and omitted many of the book's passages about slaves and slavery.

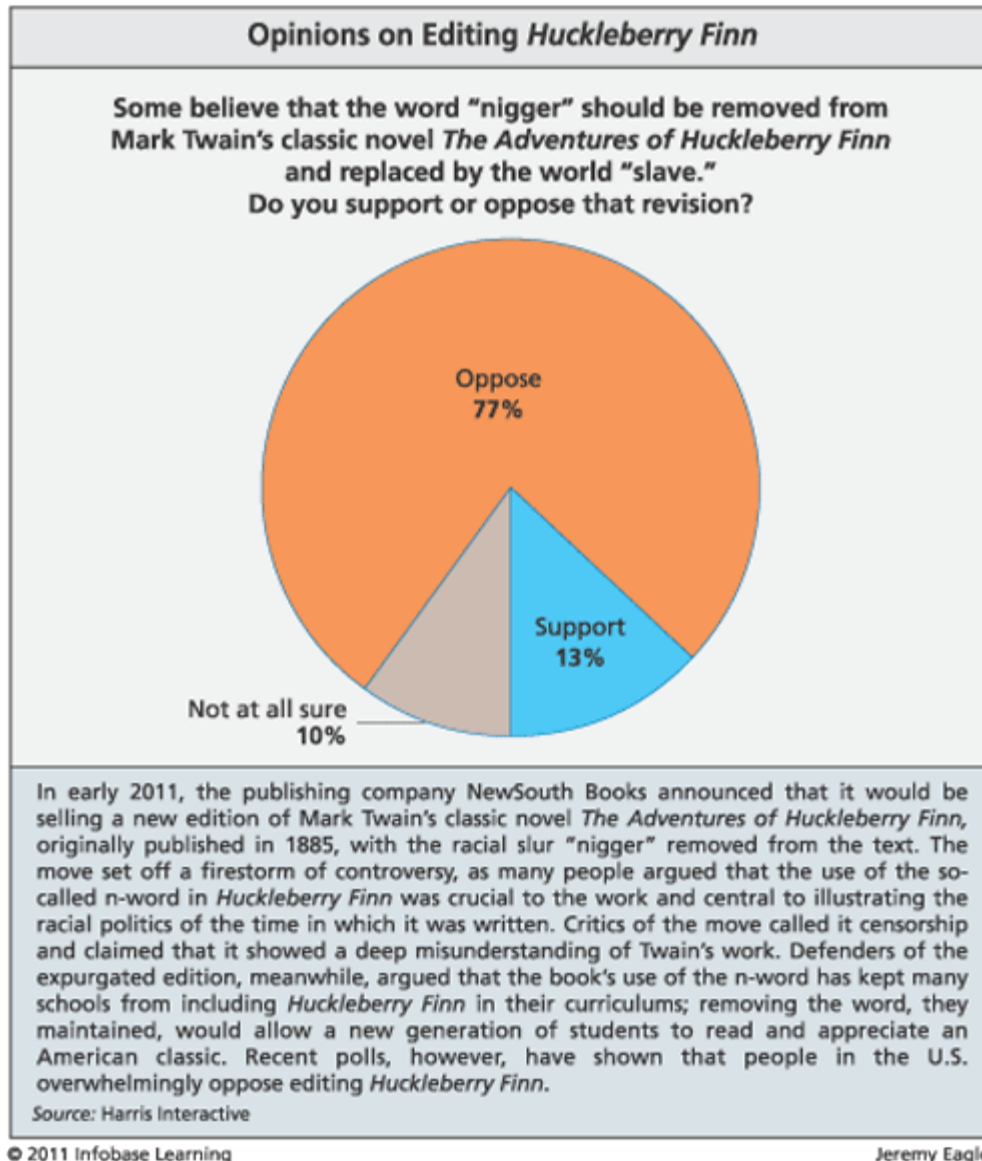
*Huckleberry Finn* has had its share of defenders, however. Although the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) had reportedly attacked the novel in the past, by the 1980s, the organization had adopted a different stance, stating, "You don't ban Mark Twain—you explain Mark Twain. To study an idea is not necessarily to endorse the idea. Mark Twain's satirical novel, *Huckleberry Finn*, accurately portrays a time in history...and one of its evils, slavery." The organization still maintains that view today.

Unlike those who made previous changes to Twain's writing, Alan Gribben has not insinuated that the book is racist. Rather, he has said, the controversy over its use of the n-word has kept people from reading what is otherwise a monumental work of literature. "It's such a shame," Gribben said in January 2011, "that one word should be a barrier between a marvelous reading experience and a lot of readers."

Gribben has said that his new edition of Twain's work is not intended to take the place of the original text. Rather, he insists, it is designed to allow younger readers to appreciate *Huckleberry Finn* without having to delve into the controversy over the n-word. Gribben explained, "[I]t is not intended for the expert. It is not intended for the advanced reader, not intended for the senior scholar." He also notes that "that word has proved to be quite a hurdle for many younger readers, their parents and their teachers."

*Huckleberry Finn* is far from the only classic to be challenged. Many famous books through the years, such as Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* (1955), whose protagonist is a pedophile, and J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951), which is about a juvenile delinquent, have been criticized for a variety of reasons, usually because they were sexually charged or were perceived to have a negative influence on children. Other books, such as J. K. Rowling's enormously popular Harry Potter series, have been criticized by religious groups for glamorizing the occult. [See [Altered and Censored Books Controversial \(sidebar\)](#)]

Some publishers have also produced abridged versions of famous works, with passages that some readers might consider boring or unimportant removed. Those versions are often controversial as well, drawing complaints from many readers that only an author can say whether a passage of his or her work is unimportant.



## Supporters Argue: Books Should Be Edited to Be More Appropriate

Supporters of editing the classics argue that, in cases such as that of *Huckleberry Finn*, it is worth removing one word to make the novel accessible to a new generation of readers who otherwise would not be exposed to it. "[I]t seems to me that this small change enables us to set aside a word that has inflamed all discussions of the book now for 30 or 40 years," Gribben told NPR in January 2011. Removing offensive language, he said, allows readers to "look at the novels and see the biting satire and the...very realistic treatment of slave conditions and so forth."

Supporters also maintain that tweaking classic literature to meet new cultural norms actually helps make the original intent of the work clearer. A caller to Conan's radio show *Talk of the Nation* named Mary Lee argued in January 2011 that, with the controversial n-word removed, students can really focus on the important themes of the book. "[I]f...students do not have to face that word directly head on," she said, "I think it opens up so much for teachers to then get students and parents [engaged] in a conversation." Indeed, defenders argue, readers can more effectively absorb racial complexity in Twain's work without having to deal with the controversy of the n-word.

Proponents of editing the classics argue that removing offensive words or passages from classic literature is an appropriate way to introduce certain works to younger readers. Indeed, they contend, allowing children to read

sanitized versions of great books may make them more inclined to read those books unedited when they are older. James Duban, an English professor at the University of North Texas in Denton, argued in the *New York Times* in January 2011:

*School kids should be able, at their teacher's discretion, to read modified editions of classic works.... There will be time enough in high school or college to study the original books and learn how those explore, and ultimately subvert, bigotry. In today's wasteland of "gaming" and other electronic distractions, I applaud any effort to perpetuate the reading and enjoyment of great fiction.*

Even some who do not agree with Gribben's editorial decision (his views that the word "slave" is an adequate substitute for "nigger," and that "slave" is less charged a word than "nigger") support editing works like *Huckleberry Finn* if that is the only way young people will be able to read them. "[I]f it takes censorship to insure that the book is still widely read," novelist Francine Prose argued in January 2011, "it might not be the worst thing. Let students experience Huck's consciousness and discover the cruel realities that his culture took for granted. After that they may be inspired to read what Mark Twain actually wrote."

Defenders of the new edition of *Huckleberry Finn* also take issue with the critique that the edited text is no longer Twain's original work. Gribben told NPR that Twain would have been open to his changes, arguing that the author

*changed locations repeatedly. He changed his costume, donning the famous white suit in the last few years. He changed his text. He changed his lectures.... So, really, who of us is to say whether he might have adapted to this? After 125 years, the book...belongs to America as much as it belongs to the author.*

Gribben also argued that the n-word is not intrinsic to *Huckleberry Finn*. He insisted that, in using the word, Twain was not making an important point, but instead "was simply trying to evoke what language prevailed in that part along the Mississippi River in the 1840s.... It was not the point of his book. The point of his book is the context all around the word, and [the word "slaves"] certainly conveys the inferior and subjugated status of African-Americans in the 1840s."

## **Opponents Argue: Classic Works Should Not Be Altered**

Critics of editing classic books insist that changing an author's original words changes the intent, which, in the case of *Huckleberry Finn*, is to illustrate the evils of slavery. They also say that revising Twain's original work deprives students of crucial exposure to a dark but significant time in U.S. history. "It's not *Huckleberry Finn* anymore," David Bradley, a writing professor at the University of Oregon in Eugene, told 60 Minutes. "What are we teaching [students]? This may be their first encounter with slavery.... There is a reality there that you cannot avoid."

Indeed, supporters argue that any author—especially one as lauded as Twain—chooses his words very carefully. Changing those words, they say, changes the overall meaning of the text. Jeffrey Nichols of the Mark Twain House and Museum in Hartford, Connecticut, told *USA Today* that the n-word is "terrible, it's hurtful, but it's there for a reason."

Opponents contend that great works of art should not be changed simply because somebody finds them uncomfortable to look at. NPR commentator Scott Simon argued in January 2011 that "the effrontery...to replace a word that a genius pointedly used more than 200 times when he wrote the book...seems a bit like covering the large, gaping wounds shown in Picasso's [famous painting] *Guernica* with Band-Aids."

Critics of editing the classics also take issue with the argument that removing objectionable words and phrases, such as the n-word, makes it easier to study classic literature. A schoolteacher from Michigan who called in to *Talk of the Nation* argued that great literature such as *Huckleberry Finn* is "supposed to be difficult. Rewriting things like *Huck Finn* is the first step to rewriting history. What's next?"



Opponents also contend that editors such as Gribben are wrong to assume that two words, such as the n-word and "slave," are interchangeable. Larry Wilmore, a correspondent on Comedy Central's *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, has suggested that using the word "slave" changes the entire meaning of *Huckleberry Finn*. "The n-word speaks to a society that casually dehumanized black people," he said on the show. "Slave was just a job description. And it's not even accurate—in the book Jim is no longer a slave, he ran away. Twain's point is that he can't run away from being a nigger."

Critics argue that readers should be smart enough to discern the true meaning of a text by themselves without an editor filtering it for them. Author Gish Jen wrote for the *New York Times* in January 2011:

*We all wish our literature was less riddled with racism, not to say anti-Semitism, misogyny, homophobia, and other less than noble manifestations of the human spirit. In the end, though, it is up to the reader to bring context to the page. The reader's failure is not remedied by changes to the text; it is remedied by education and its happy result, perspective.*

## **Future Edits of *Huckleberry Finn* Possible**

NewSouth's edition of *Huckleberry Finn* was released in February 2011. Because the book is in the public domain, it is possible that it will continue to be edited in the coming years.

For his part, Gribben has said that his edition of *Huckleberry Finn* is merely one option for young students. "I make no apologies for offering this alternative," he has said. "I am not, in any way, decreeing that a great many readers should do this, go to [this] edition. But there it is, and we'll let the readers decide what they want to do with it."

## **Discussion Questions**

- 1) Can changing one word significantly alter a great work of literature, such as *Huckleberry Finn*? Explain your position.
- 2) Are books with complicated moral issues appropriate for children? If those books are edited to make them simpler, is their original purpose altered? Why or why not?
- 3) Why do you think *Huckleberry Finn* has sparked such controversy for so many readers over the years?
- 4) Read some of the supposedly offensive passages from *Huckleberry Finn*. Replace the n-word with a similar word of your choice. How does the text read? Do you think the message is the same? Explain your findings in an essay.

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## **Additional Sources**

*Additional information about editing the classics can be found in the following source:*

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## **Contact Information**

*Information on how to contact organizations that either are mentioned in the discussion of editing the classics or can provide additional information on the subject is listed below:*

Mark Twain House & Museum  
351 Farmington Avenue  
Hartford, Conn. 06105  
Telephone: (860) 247-0998  
Internet: [www.marktwainhouse.org](http://www.marktwainhouse.org)

NewSouth, Inc.  
P.O. Box 1588  
Montgomery, Ala. 36102  
Telephone: (334) 834-3556  
Internet: [www.newsouthbooks.com](http://www.newsouthbooks.com)

## **Keywords**

*For further information about the ongoing debate over editing the classics, search for the following words and terms in electronic databases and other publications:*



*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*

Alan Gribben

Challenged books

Mark Twain

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