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|   | **Teaching Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*by Shelley Fisher Fishkin** Dr. Shelley Fisher Fishkin, Professor of American Studies and English at the University of Texas, is the author of *Lighting Out for the Territory: Reflections on Mark Twain and American Culture* (Oxford University Press, 1997) and *Was Huck Black? Mark Twain and African American Voices* (Oxford University Press, 1993). She is President of the Mark Twain Circle of America and editor of the 19-volume Oxford Mark Twain.Adapted from a talk given at the July 1995 Summer Teachers' Institute at The Mark Twain House, Hartford, Connecticut. ©1995 Shelley Fisher Fishkin. Reprinted by permission of the author.Despite the fact that it is the most taught novel and most taught work of American literature in American schools from junior high to graduate school, *Huckleberry Finn* remains a hard book to read and a hard book to teach. The difficulty is caused by two distinct but related problems. First, one must understand how Socratic irony works if the novel is to make any sense at all; most students don't. Secondly, one must be able to place the novel in a larger historical and literary context -- one that includes the history of American racism and the literary productions of African-American writers -- if the book is to be read as anything more than a sequel to *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (which it both is and is not); most students can't. These two problems pose real obstacles for teachers. Are they surmountable? Under some circumstances, yes. Under others, perhaps not. I think under most circumstances, however, they are obstacles you can deal with.It is impossible to read *Huck Finn* intelligently without understanding that Mark Twain's consciousness and awareness is larger than that of any of the characters in the novel, including Huck. Indeed, part of what makes the book so effective is the fact that Huck is too innocent and ignorant to understand what's wrong with his society and what's right about his own transgressive behavior. Twain, on the other hand, knows the score. One must be skeptical about most of what Huck says in order to hear what Twain is saying. In a 1991 interview, Ralph Ellison suggested that critics who condemn Twain for the portrait of Jim that we get in the book forget that "one also has to look at the teller of the tale, and realize that you are getting a black man, an adult, seen through the condescending eyes -- partially -- of a young white boy." Are you saying, I asked Ellison, "that those critics are making the same old mistake of confusing the narrator with the author? That they're saying that Twain saw him that way rather than that Huck did?" "Yes," was Ellison's answer.Clemens as a child accepted without question, as Huck did, the idea that slaves were property; neither wanted to be called a "low-down Abolitionist" if he could possibly help it. Between the time of that Hannibal childhood and adolescence, however, and the years in which Twain wrote *Huckleberry Finn,* Twain's consciousness changed. By 1885, when the book was published, Samuel Clemens held views that were very different from those he ascribed to Huck. It might be helpful at this point to chart for your students the growth of the author's developing moral awareness on the subject of race and racism -- starting with some of his writings on the persecution of the Chinese in San Francisco (such as *Disgraceful Persecution of a Boy*), then moving through his marriage into an abolitionist family, the 1869 anti-lynching editorial that he published in The Buffalo Express entitled *Only a Nigger,* and his exposure to figures like Frederick Douglass and his father-in-law, Jervis Langdon.By the time he wrote *Huckleberry Finn,* Samuel Clemens had come to believe not only that slavery was a horrendous wrong, but that white Americans owed black Americans some form of "reparations" for it. One graphic way to demonstrate this fact to your students is to share with them the letter Twain wrote to the Dean of the Yale Law School in 1885, in which he explained why he wanted to pay the expenses of Warner McGuinn, one of the first black law students at Yale. "We have ground the manhood out of them," Twain wrote Dean Wayland on Christmas Eve, 1885, "and the shame is ours, not theirs, & we should pay for it."Ask your students: why does a writer who holds these views create a narrator who is too innocent and ignorant to challenge the topsy-turvy moral universe that surrounds him? "All right, then, I'll *go* to Hell," Huck says when he decides not to return Jim to slavery. Samuel Clemens might be convinced that slavery itself and its legacy are filled with shame, but Huck is convinced that his reward for defying the moral norms of his society will be eternal damnation.Something new happened in *Huck Finn* that had never happened in American literature before. It was a book, as many critics have observed, that served as a Declaration of Independence from the genteel English novel tradition. *Huckleberry Finn* allowed a different kind of writing to happen: a clean, crisp, no-nonsense, earthy vernacular kind of writing that jumped off the printed page with unprecedented immediacy and energy; it was a book that talked. Huck's voice, combined with Twain's satiric genius, changed the shape of fiction in America, and African-American voices had a great deal to do with making it what it was. Expose your students to the work of some of Twain's African-American contemporaries, such as Frederick Douglass, Charles Chesnutt, and Paul Laurence Dunbar. Those voices can greatly enrich students' understanding of both the issues *Huckleberry Finn* raises and the vernacular style in which it raises them.If W.E.B. Du Bois was right that the problem of the twentieth century is the color line, one would never know it from the average secondary-school syllabus, which often avoids issues of race almost completely. Like a Trojan horse, however, *Huck Finn* can slip into the American literature classroom as a "classic," only to engulf students in heated debates about prejudice and racism, conformity, autonomy, authority, slavery and freedom. It is a book that puts on the table the very questions the culture so often tries to bury, a book that opens out into the complex history that shaped it -- the history of the ante-bellum era in which the story is set, and the history of the post-war period in which the book was written -- and it requires us to address that history as well. Much of that history is painful. Indeed, it is to avoid confronting the raw pain of that history that black parents sometimes mobilize to ban the novel. Brushing history aside, however, is no solution to the larger challenge of dealing with its legacy. Neither is placing the task of dealing with it on one book.We continue to live, as a nation, in the shadow of racism while being simultaneously committed, on paper, to principles of equality. As Ralph Ellison observed in our interview, it is this irony at the core of the American experience that Mark Twain forces us to confront head-on.History as it is taught in the history classroom is often denatured and dry. You can keep your distance from it if you choose. Slaveholding was evil. Injustice was the law of the land. History books teach that. But they don't require you to look the perpetrators of that evil in the eye and find yourself looking at a kind, gentle, good-hearted Aunt Sally. They don't make you understand that it was not the villains who made the system work, but the ordinary folks, the good folks, the folks, who did nothing more than fail to question the set of circumstances that surrounded them, who failed to judge that evil as evil and who deluded themselves into thinking they were doing good, earning safe passage for themselves into heaven.When accomplished fiction writers expose the all-too-human betrayals that well-meaning human beings perpetrate in the name of business-as-usual, they disrupt the ordered rationalizations that insulate the heart from pain. Novelists, like surgeons, cut straight to the heart. But unlike surgeons, they don't sew up the wound. They leave it open to heal or fester, depending on the septic level of the reader's own environment.Irony, history, and racism all painfully intertwine in our past and present, and they all come together in *Huck Finn.* Because racism is endemic to our society, a book like *Huck Finn,* which brings the problem to the surface, can explode like a hand grenade in a literature classroom accustomed to the likes of *Macbeth* or *Great Expectations* -- works which exist at a safe remove from the lunchroom or the playground. If we lived in a world in which racism had been eliminated generations before, teaching *Huck Finn* would be a piece of cake. Unfortunately that's not the world we live in. The difficulties we have teaching this book reflect the difficulties we continue to confront in our classrooms and our nation. As educators, it is incumbent upon us to teach our students to decode irony, to understand history, and to be repulsed by racism and bigotry wherever they find it. But this is the task of a lifetime. It's unfair to force one novel to bear the burden -- alone -- of addressing these issues and solving these problems. But *Huck Finn* -- and you -- can make a difference. |