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Leave Twain alone

By Kathleen Parker
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While sorting through the perennial lip-pursing tempest about a certain word in Mark Twain's "The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn" - the "N-word," as we now say it - I turned for inspiration to the master himself.

"The difference between the almost-right word & the right word is . . . the difference between the lightning bug and the lightning," Twain wrote.

This is a familiar refrain among writers and editors, who toil in solitary agony - agonize in solitary toil? - over the perfect combinations of vowels and consonants. Finding just the right word, when it occurs, is the stuff of arias.

But what about eliminating just the "wrong" word? This is for the editor to urge and, in a righteous world, the writer to decide.

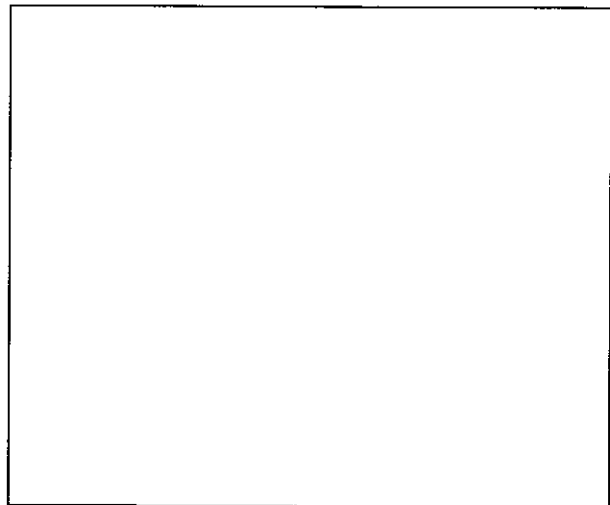
The latest affront on Twain's word selection, replacing that N-word with "slave," to protect the sensibilities of moderns is the work of a well-intentioned heretic. What was it someone or other said? The road to Hell is paved with good intentions. Then again, Twain himself recommended Heaven for the climate and Hell for the company.

While on Earth, let me add my voice to the

chorus of those who, in the name of all that is hallowed, object to the alteration of literature for the benefit of illiterates. The fellow who edited the new Twain edition, Alan Gribben, isn't illiterate, of course, and therefore has no excuse. He's a professor of English at Auburn University. But he aims to increase the likelihood that non-readers will read more Twain if the author isn't so offensive.

No one would find this more offensive than Twain, who was, not least, reliably pithy about the small-minded and overly sensitive. And no one would argue that the word in question isn't emotionally charged and, in certain contexts, highly offensive. The issue here isn't whether the word is good or bad (I personally despise it), but whether one should rewrite another's literary work.

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