

# The Washington Post

## Leave Twain alone

The simple answer is, no.

As even Gribben concedes, in Twain's remarkable work, his use of the word was both common to the times and an indictment of slavery. If readers can't understand this, then perhaps a teacher might enlighten them. The purpose of reading isn't just to run words past a pupil's pupils but to enhance understanding and reveal truth through what we call "teaching."

That some teachers and librarians find Twain offensive is regrettable. But let's be clear: These facts are an indictment of teachers and librarians who should find another line of work, not that Twain needs fixin'.

At what point, besides, do we stop with the red pencil? When will we have sanitized the library such that no one's feelings are hurt? And who gets to decide? These are not new questions, but they bear repeating as we seem to know less and less.

Excising the particular word in question would keep busybodies occupied for the foreseeable future. Other offending writers include such luminaries as William Faulkner, Flannery O'Connor, Robert Penn Warren and Herman Melville, among countless others. Were these writers racist? We cannot read minds, but it seems to me that racism and the sort of worldly intelligence that inspires men and women to art are incompatible.

Relatedly, the inexhaustibly quotable Twain wrote:

"Broad, wholesome, charitable views of men and things cannot be acquired by vegetating in one little corner of the earth all one's lifetime."

More to the point, these writers selected each word painstakingly to create a world they envisioned as necessary to their purpose. That the world has changed, and our language with it, is no argument for rewriting or reconstructing the original creator's intent. To do so is both an assault on intellectual property that should be sacrosanct, and an insult to the intelligence of those whose minds we attempt to mold.

A teacher above all others should be ashamed.

Is the N-word problematic in a nation forever shackled to a racist, slave-owning past? Absolutely. But removing it from books won't eradicate it from history, nor alter the pain it provokes. Should we talk about the harm it did and still does? Certainly.

But selectively editing literature, like history, is denial by any other name. When it comes to denial and truth, as everyone knows, never the Twain shall meet.

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