

## *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* Controversy and Censorship



Objectives: (a) To consider the positive and negative aspects of censorship (b) To identify reasons for controversy about *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (c) To take a stand on the value of the novel in today's classrooms

People are often quick to declare that they think censorship is wrong, but the issue is not that simple. Most often they are simply reacting negatively to limits on their own purchasing, listening, or viewing rights. Think about the nature and purposes of censorship, which is usually an effort to protect the public from what seem to be harmful influences, and that effort is not totally blameworthy.

Look at the controversy about Mark Twain's novel, which we have just spent a substantial amount of time reading and discussing. People who take issue with the novel usually do so over a cluster of subjects related to language and racial attitudes. Huck's language is not grammatically correct, and it certainly reflects a regional dialect. This topic also dominates some discussions of novels like *The Catcher in the Rye* and *The Color Purple*. At the heart of the matter here is characterization. To limit authors to literate and grammatically correct protagonists is to claim that only a certain type of person is a proper subject for a work of literature – a very elitist stance.

The setting of the novel is pre-Civil War, and Jim is a runaway slave whose way of talking reflects the limitations society places on him. Huck often makes comments that reflect his acceptance of slavery as social norm. Mark Twain, however, obviously sees the reality of the situation. Jim is the most noble character in the novel; to condemn the novel as racist is to fail to see beyond the limits of Huck's vision. On the other hand, Huck's repeated use of the pejorative (derogatory) "n-word" is offensive to many students.

**CONTROVERSY** – a strong disagreement about the value or meaning of something

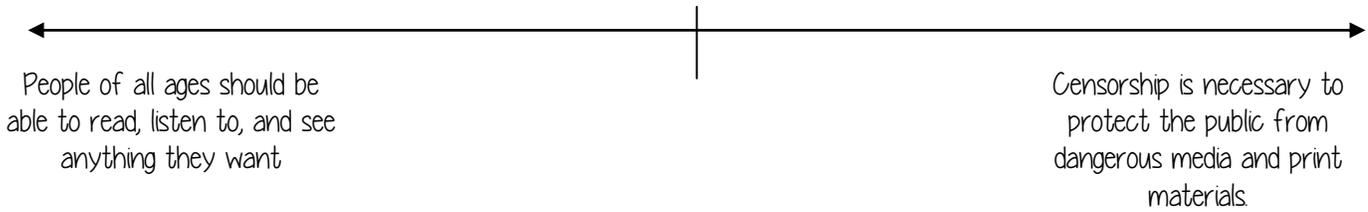
- What are some controversial topics?

**CENSORSHIP** – legal restrictions to public access to media or to printed material

- Where have you encountered censorship?
- Why might specific works be censored?

Directions: Censorship involves an official ban or limitation on access to specific written or recorded material. Use the following steps to process your thoughts.

Where would you fall on this continuum?



Explain the reasons behind your views on censorship.

Sixteen-year-old Tom has purchased a magazine with sexually explicit pictures and hid it in the closet of his bedroom. His mother found it there when she was cleaning. When he arrived home from school that afternoon, the two had a furious argument. Tom insisted he was old enough to make his own decisions about what reading material was suitable for him. How might his mother have seen it differently? Who was right? Explain.

Thirteen-year-old Lindsey had an extensive collection of popular music and was seldom seen when she was not listening to one group or another. One day her father listened to a selection and was appalled at the amount of violent and vulgar language he heard. He listened to a second selection and heard the same thing. He tossed the entire collection into the trash, which was collected and hauled away a few minutes later. He explained his actions to Lindsey when she got home from basketball practice. She became angry and ran out of the room crying, saying he has no right to do that. Who was right? Explain?

A new movie came out, especially targeting teenage audiences. Throughout the film, the characters use terms that are highly offensive to various ethnic groups – Italian Americans, Chinese Americans, Hispanics, and Jews, among others. Officials ordered theater owners not to show this movie and forbade local video rental stores from having it in their inventories. Do you think the local officials were correct in their decision? Why or Why not? Explain.

Identify two reasons why censorship can be good and two reasons why it can be bad.