

Humanities Out There Lesson 6: Bad Boys, Bad Books

From the *New York Herald*
March 18, 1885

The sage censors of the Concord Public Library [Massachusetts] have unanimously reached the conclusion that "Huckleberry Finn" is not the sort of reading matter for the knowledge seekers of the town... They have accordingly banished it from the shelves of that institution.

The reasons which moved them to this action are weighty and to the point. One of the Library Committee, while not prepared to hazard the opinion that the book is "absolutely immoral in its tone," does not hesitate to declare that to him "it seems to contain but very little humor." Another committeeman perused the volume with great care and discovered that it was "couched in the language of a rough, ignorant dialect" and that "all through its pages there is a systematic use of bad grammar and an employment of inelegant expressions." The third member voted the book "flippant" and "trash of the veriest sort." They all united in the verdict that "it deals with a series of experiences that are certainly not elevating," and voted that it could not be tolerated in the public library.

**PARENTAL
ADVISORY
EXPLICIT CONTENT**

1. Why did the Concord Public Library ban *Huckleberry Finn* in 1885?

2. Why are Americans in 1885 concerned about juvenile delinquency?

3. What is a movie/show/song/game that your parents/teachers/pastors object to you watching/listening/playing? What reasons do they give for not liking it? Would you object to your little brother or sister watching/listening/playing it? Why or why not?

Persons attempting to attempting to find a motive in this class will be prosecuted; persons attempting to find a moral in it will be banished; persons attempting to find a plot in it will be shot.

Flippant – disrespectful... joking about something that is sinused to be taken

Malleable – capable of being pulled into a new shape... Like a piece of dough, or a person who does what someone else says

Didactic – intended to teach a moral lesson... this term is often negative, as in the lesson is being taught in a very obvious and stupid way, like 'beating you over the head with it'

From *The Good Scholar* (1863)

Dear Young Friend:

By the appointment of the School Committee, I am to be your teacher. This office is a very important one. To me the parents have entrusted their dearest interest--the education of their beloved children; their intellectual training, and the care of their manners and morals.

But the responsibility of making the school pleasant, and a source of improvement, rests upon the pupils as well as on the teacher. Do not come to make the school a place of idleness and play instead of study. Make it your earnest purpose to obtain all the good from the school you can.

"Whatever you do, do the best you can." This was the excellent, parting advice of a venerable man to his grandchild. And the child always remembered it, and practiced upon it; and it made him a man, useful in life, and respected by all who knew him. Make it your motto.

Furthermore, you must carefully regard, and cheerfully obey, all the rules of the school. In every family, school, society, town, state, and nation, certain rules and laws regulate the conduct of the members. There can be no happy family, school, or community, without such rules and regulations. And these rules must be strictly obeyed to be of any service. To secure this obedience, there are always certain penalties, or punishments, connected with disobedience. These laws and their penalties are always friends to the good and obedient, but a terror to the lawless and wicked.

And of all sins, profaneness is the most inexcusable. No possible advantage can be derived from it. And then indulgence in it is not only sinful itself, but it leads to other sins.

Out of 986 boys sentenced to the Massachusetts Reform School for crime, it was ascertained that 872 had been addicted to profanity. From this statement it would seem that eight ninths of the boys who fall into criminal habits are profane swearers! It has been said that the mouth is the chimney of the heart. That must be a corrupt heart indeed that can pour forth from this chimney volumes of profane and foul words. No wonder that a mother, when she heard that her little son used such words, thoroughly washed his mouth with soap and sand and water. His heart needed washing too.

NOTICE: PERSONS attempting to find a motive in this narrative will be prosecuted; persons attempting to find a moral in it will be banished; persons attempting to find a plot in it will be shot.

-- BY ORDER OF THE AUTHOR

You don't know about me without you have read a book by the name of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*; but that ain't no matter. That book was made by Mr. Mark Twain, and he told the truth, mainly. There was things which he stretched, but mainly he told the truth. That is nothing. I never seen anybody but lied one time or another, without it was Aunt Polly, or the widow, or maybe Mary. Aunt Polly -- Tom's Aunt Polly, she is -- and Mary, and the Widow Douglas is all told about in that book, which is mostly a true book, with some stretchers, as I said before.

... So the Widow Douglas she took me for her son, and allowed she would sivilize me; but it was rough living in the house all the time, considering how dismal regular and decent the widow was in all her ways; and so when I couldn't stand it no longer I lit out. I got into my old rags and my sugar-hogshead again, and was free and satisfied. But Tom Sawyer he hunted me up and said he was going to start a band of robbers, and I might join if I would go back to the widow and be respectable. So I went back.

The widow she cried over me, and called me a poor lost lamb, and she called me a lot of other names, too, but she never meant no harm by it. She put me in them new clothes again, and I couldn't do nothing but sweat and sweat, and feel all cramped up. Well, then, the old thing commenced again. The widow rung a bell for supper, and you had to come to time. When you got to the table you couldn't go right to eating, but you had to wait for the widow to tuck down her head and grumble a little over the victuals, though there warn't really anything the matter with them... after supper she got out her book and learned me about Moses and the Bulrushers, and I was in a sweat to find out all about him; but by and by she let it out that Moses had been dead a considerable long time; so then I didn't care no more about him, because I don't take no stock in dead people.

Pretty soon I wanted to smoke, and asked the widow to let me. She wouldn't. She said it was a mean practice and wasn't clean, and I must try to not do it any more. That is just the way with some people. They get down on a thing when they don't know nothing about it. Here she was a-bothering about Moses, which was no kin to her, and no use to anybody, being gone, you see, yet finding a power of fault with me for doing a thing that had some good in it. And she took snuff, too; of course that was all right, because she done it herself.

Her sister, Miss Watson, a tolerable slim old maid, with goggles on, had just come to live with her, and took a set at me now with a spelling-book. She worked me middling hard for about an hour, and then the widow made her ease up. I couldn't stood it much longer. Then for an hour it was deadly dull, and I was fidgety. Miss Watson would say, "Don't put your feet up there, Huckleberry;" and "Don't scrunch up like that, Huckleberry -- set up straight;" and pretty soon she would say, "Don't gap and stretch like that, Huckleberry -- why don't you try to behave?" Then she told me all about the bad place, and I said I wished I was there. She got mad then, but I didn't mean no harm. All I wanted was to go somewheres; all I wanted was a change, I warn't particular. She said it was wicked to say what I said; said she wouldn't say it for the whole world; she was going to live so as to go to the good place. Well, I couldn't see no advantage in going where she was going, so I made up my mind I wouldn't try for it. But I never said so, because it would only make trouble, and wouldn't do no good.

Now she had got a start, and she went on and told me all about the good place. She said all a body would have to do there was to go around all day long with a harp and sing, forever and ever. So I didn't think much of it. But I never said so. I asked her if she reckoned Tom Sawyer would go there, and she said not by a considerable sight. I was glad about that, because I wanted him and me to be together.

4. Characterize some of the differences between the style of *The Good Scholar* and the style of *Huckleberry Finn*. Give specific evidence in support of your ideas.
5. Taking Aaron's slideshow into consideration, what kind of "persons" do you think Mark Twain is talking to in the threatening "Notice"? Do you know people like that, and if so, how do you try to deal with them?
6. Each member of your group should find one separate instance of Huck making an error in the spelling, grammar, or meaning of one of his sentences. What does he mean to say? Why might his mistake actually make more sense than the rule he is failing to follow? Have you ever had an experience with using English (or Spanish) that was like that?
7. Huckleberry Finn is a fictional character, but he refers to Mark Twain, who is a real person, and also to the book *Tom Sawyer*, which is a real book that features a character named Huckleberry Finn. This literary technique is called metatextuality. To give another example, if you've ever seen *Spongebob Squarepants* you might have noticed that the angry squid guy often says things like "this is the worst eleven minutes of my life," because an episode of *Spongebob* lasts for eleven minutes. But a fictional character shouldn't really know that he is in a book or television show. What kind of feeling does this give you as a reader? Does it make you feel like Huck is more real, or like he is less real? Why? Can you think of other examples from shows or movies you've seen?
8. What is the Widow doing when she is "grumbling over" the food? Why do you think Huck fails to understand this? What evidence is there that her view of religion (and also Miss Watson's) is actually somewhat shallow and stupid?
9. *Huckleberry Finn* is about a boy who frees a black man from slavery. With this in mind, why might the reference to Moses be a deliberate symbol rather than just a coincidence?
10. What is odd about the following sentence: "Tom Sawyer he hunted me up and said he was going to start a band of robbers, and I might join if I would go back to the widow and be respectable"? What does it tell you about what Tom Sawyer's personality? Have you ever known anyone like Tom?