A

dventures of Huckleberry Finn is perhaps the most famous, most beloved, and most controversial novel featuring a prominent black character and written by a white author. Extremely popular in its own day and in the decades that followed, Mark Twain’s novel became one of the most holy of the canonical texts of American literature once mid-twentieth-century critics discovered in it the key to the American experience and an uplifting illustration of the American spirit. The influential critic Lionel Trilling, in The Liberal Imagination, asserted that Huck Finn and Jim formed a “community of saints,” and Trilling effectively established the novel as national monument (104, 106). However, the eupptic effect of Adventures of Huckleberry Finn on the body politic is not as indisputable as many of its apologists would have it, and during the last thirty years, controversies have arisen over use of the novel in the classroom, particularly given the frequent appearance in the book of a well-known and offensive racial epithet. The story is presented as a meandering and quixotic tale of a poor, white boy and his boon companion, a runaway slave, as they make their way down river, deeper and deeper into the slaveholding South, until they reach a problematic but seemingly happy ending, in which the adventures come to an abrupt end with Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn playing a dangerous game with Jim. It is then discovered that, unbeknownst to both Huck and his companion, Jim had already been set free, so he was not a runaway slave after all, at which point Jim almost disappears from the text entirely. Twain’s Mississippi River odyssey, with its local color and vaudeville-styled humor, is narrated by Huck himself, who
manages to refer to Jim and to all African Americans by one of the most offensive terms in the modern English language more than two hundred times. For many readers, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is therefore a work that causes embarrassment, pain, and resentment. As a hypercanonized text, one frequently included as required reading not only in college classrooms but also in high school and even earlier, Twain’s 1885 novel continues to be a controversial touchstone for discussion of race in the United States today.

The controversy over the recently published NewSouth Edition of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* raises once more the question of censorship and of the functions of literature more generally (see Gribben; unless otherwise noted, all references to *Huckleberry Finn* and to Gribben’s “Editor’s Introduction” cited parenthetically in the text will be to this edition). Edited by Alan Gribben, an established Mark Twain scholar who teaches at Auburn University at Montgomery, Alabama, the NewSouth Edition notoriously substitutes what Gribben considers to be less offensive “synonyms” for Twain’s original racial epithets, of which the “N-word” is both the most pervasive term in the novel and the least acceptable in civil discourse today. (A caveat to the reader: I will use the offensive word in the body of the text below, but only in direct quotations, some of which come from books routinely given to schoolchildren as required reading.) Predictably, following the publication of the NewSouth Edition in 2011, a public outcry arose against it, as Mark Twain’s would-be defenders lashed out against the “censorship” as they rushed to the apparent rescue of a literary masterpiece that was thought to be imperiled by yet another “politically correct” assault. Ironically, Gribben’s own justification of the project of this NewSouth Edition is, in part, that it might help save the great American novel by making it more suitable for classroom use in high schools or colleges. Gribben feared that, without a less-offensive alternative, the near-omnipresence of such an inflammatory and controversial word might otherwise keep *Huckleberry Finn* off the syllabus. In the cases of both Gribben’s expurgations and the defense of Twain’s original language, an implicit question is, what is the function of a work of literature in the classroom . . . and in the world?

Before examining the controversy over the NewSouth Edition of *Huckleberry Finn* further, I would like to begin with a brief autobiographical anecdote, and I promise to keep it well under 500,000 words (i.e., the length of Twain’s own recently published, unabridged autobiography). It occurs to me that I did not read *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* in high school; rather, I read it on my own during those years, but it was never an assigned text. I entered ninth grade in 1982, the same year that John Wallace, an African American teacher at the Mark Twain Intermediate School in Fairfax, Virginia, famously or infamously condemned *Huckleberry Finn* as “racist trash” (see M. Moore 1); Wallace went on to publish his own edition of the novel, which removed all instances of both the N-word and, for reasons presumably unrelated to racism, the word “Hell.” I do not know if my high school or its teachers made any deliberate decision to avoid *Huckleberry Finn*, but I can imagine that the controversial repetition of the N-word might have made both teachers and students uncomfortable. This would have been in what was then thought of as a fairly progressive region of the “New