

Leave Twain Alone

By **Kathleen Parker**, Published: February 25, 2011

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. 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 proof 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 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 another name. When it comes to denial and truth, as everyone knows, never the Twain shall meet.