

Lesson Ten

Objectives:

- Students will define the term “censorship” and explore the controversies over censored books, particularly Mark Twain’s *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.
- Teachers will provide students with brief background on the literary shift from Victorian moral uplift to moral realism around the turn of the twentieth century in the United States.
- Students will read a brief selection from *Huck Finn* and identify features that some might find offensive.
- Students will read a series of documents that highlight the controversy over Mark Twain’s book, as well as Twain’s response to these issues.
- Students will identify arguments for and against censorship and engage in a brief extemporaneous debate on the topic.

Materials Needed:

Reactions to the initial publication of Mark Twain’s *Huck Finn*—

<http://www.chass.utoronto.ca/~mcuddy/ENG359Y/Twain.htm>

Mark Twain’s *Huck Finn* at NIU site—

<http://lincoln.lib.niu.edu/cgi-bin/philologic/navigate.pl?lincoln.3566>

Teachers should also encourage students to view some of the illustrations from the book—

<http://lincoln.lib.niu.edu/cgi-bin/philologic/getobject.pl?c.3566:1.lincoln>

Background on the controversy over *Huck Finn*—<http://www.pbs.org/now/arts/twain.html>

Response by Twain to the ban on *Huck Finn*—<http://www.twainquotes.com/19351102.html>

Time Required:

The lesson will require one period for teachers to address the issue of censorship and for students to read through the documents related to the controversy over Mark Twain’s *Huck Finn*. Teachers may assign as homework that students identify arguments in favor of and against censorship. An additional class period will be needed to conduct a debate on the issue of censoring objectionable materials.

Introduction:

Libraries and other government institutions historically have attempted to limit access to published works that seemed to violate moral, religious, and cultural conventions. This has been especially true of children’s literature or works available to children. In this lesson, students will examine the controversy surrounding Mark Twain’s *Huck Finn* and engage in a debate over the issue of censoring such materials.

Assignment:

1. To begin the lesson, the teacher should place the following definition on the board (from <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Censorship>): “the suppression of speech or deletion of communicative material which may be considered objectionable, harmful, or sensitive.” Ask students to identify the terms used in the definition. After this, ask students to name books or other works that have been censored or banned in the present day and the reasons why. Teachers can post student responses on the board. (Note: As the lesson unfolds, teachers can have students write down responses on the worksheet provided.)

2. Remind students that one of the works that still creates controversy (since its publication in 1885) is Mark Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. (For background, teachers can consult the brief essay from the PBS site linked above.) Read the following from the preface of the book: “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.” Ask students to speculate why Mark Twain included this “warning” and why the person supposedly issuing it signed himself “By Order of the Author Per G. G., Chief of Ordnance.”

3. It may be useful for teachers to mention briefly the shift from Victorian to realist and modernist approaches in literature around the turn of the twentieth century. The Victorian era is named after Queen Victoria (1837-1901) whose reign in Great Britain symbolized the (upper) middle-class values of propriety, morality, and temperance. Victorian literature of this era in both Britain and the United States tended to emphasize adherence to social conventions and themes of moral improvement. Mark Twain’s writings illustrate a shift toward a more modern approach, concentrating on moral realism, irony/hypocrisy, and a satire of social conventions. Other American writers employing a modernist approach in this era include Theodore Dreiser, Edith Wharton, and Stephen Crane.

4. Teachers with access to computers can have students read from *Huck Finn* at the NIU site either a pre-selected passage (any will likely do to illustrate Twain’s approach) or one of student’s choosing. Also, teachers should encourage students to view some of the illustrations that accompany the novel at the web site listed above. As they read, students should identify those features of the story that some might find objectionable. Teachers can then survey student responses, which may include the following:

- Use of the epithet “nigger”
- The African-American slave dialect of Jim
- The way in which Jim is treated by those around him
- Huck’s disobedience of authority
- The mockery of social customs and conventions
- The lack of any clear (didactic) moral message

5. Now tell students that they will read through several documents that demonstrate the initial reactions to *Huck Finn*, one of which was the banning of the book by the Concord, Massachusetts public library. Divide students into groups of 3 to 4, instruct them to read through the sources at the site above (or teachers can make copies) while identifying the positive and negative contemporary to *Huck Finn* on the worksheet provided.

6. For purposes of the homework assignment, teachers can either divide students randomly into “pro” and “con” groups or allow them to choose their own position on the following debate topic: **Resolved. It is sometimes necessary for government institutions, such as libraries, to limit access to or ban publications that may be considered offensive to the general public.** Teachers should tell students to develop 3 to 4 arguments and several examples in support of their assigned or chosen position.

7. To begin class the following day, teachers should set the room up so that students on opposing sides can face each other. The instructor should facilitate an exchange of views, limiting time if necessary to ensure that both positions have an opportunity to express their arguments. If they desire, teachers may wish to configure the exchange as a “walking debate,” which allows students to switch sides throughout, if and when they have been persuaded by the opposition, or simply wish to play devil’s advocate. After about 30 minutes or so, teachers can bring the debate to a conclusion by identifying the arguments presented on both sides, commenting on which were found to be most convincing.

8. To conclude the lesson, the instructor might say, “Now that we’ve discussed the censorship of *Huck Finn*, let’s see how Mark Twain himself reacted.” Then the teacher can either distribute copies or project the Mark Twain letters (at the site listed above) for students to read. After students finish, the instructor might ask what Mark Twain’s purpose was in referring to the Bible as a possible source of corruption (**Hint: The Bible, especially the Old Testament, contains numerous stories of violence and immoral behavior.**) After a brief survey of student responses, teachers can ask students if they are aware of any satires in popular culture (e.g., television shows, film, cartoons, comic strips, publications, etc.). Student responses may include the following: *The Simpsons*, *South Park*, *Family Guy*, *Borat*, *Doonesbury*, *The Onion*, et al. Teachers can conclude the lesson by asking (or reminding) the class about the role that irony and satire play in a society based on free expression and democratic governance.

Lesson Ten: Worksheet

1. Write a definition of "censorship."
2. What are some works that have been banned or censored in U.S. History and why?
3. Based on your passage, identify characteristics of *Huck Finn* that some readers might find offensive or objectionable.
4. List supportive and critical views toward *Huck Finn* from the sources. Then in the space below, list arguments for and against the censorship of objectionable works in preparation for the class debate.

Pro	Con