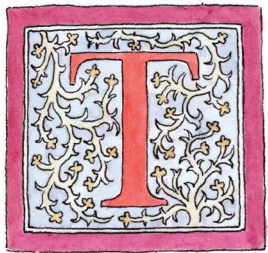


My N-word Problem— and Ours



HERE WAS A FUSS earlier this year at Milton Academy, an elite Massachusetts boarding school. In a talk about free speech, Harvey Silverglate, co-founder of the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression, mentioned Randall Kennedy's *N—: The Strange Career of a Troublesome*

Word, published in 2002 and reissued this year on its 20th anniversary with a new introduction. The dashes are mine: Silverglate spoke the full title of the book aloud.

According to an article in *Quillette* by Silverglate and Kennedy himself, who is black and who clearly wanted to signal that he stood by Silverglate's choice, Silverglate intended to note that if you aren't willing to use the N-word in full, you will "have to leave gaps in the writings and performances of, among others, James Baldwin, Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, Toni Morrison, Eudora Welty, Mark Twain, Richard Pryor, and Lenny Bruce."

Before he could say so, however, "a substantial part of the audience walked out" in protest at a white person's use of the N-word. The student group that had invited Silverglate emailed the whole school to express how shocking and unacceptable Silverglate's use of the word was. David Ball, head of Milton's upper school, made no reply to two emails from Silverglate asking to explain Silverglate's position in a school-wide email.

Kennedy's book should be required reading for every American—and, as I shall explain at the end, every American Jew. He emphasizes in his new introduction that "certain efforts to expunge *n*— have gone awry, lost perspective, abandoned essential norms of freedom of thought and expression, and degenerated into petty tyranny" (again the dashes are mine, not Kennedy's).

But what particularly caught my attention was Silverglate's point that the reluctance to use the N-word leads to gaps in the works of many famous American writers, political figures, and performers. Whatever your position on the matter, we should be clear that making the N-word verboten doesn't just result in leaving gaps. Changing the words of serious writers obviously creates gaps. The problem is that you sometimes can't understand their work at all without the N-word.

Take the example of Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* and William Faulkner's *Absalom! Absalom!* Ernest Hemingway once said that "All modern American literature comes from one book by Mark Twain called *Huckleberry Finn*." And *Absalom! Absalom!* is widely regarded as the greatest novel of America's greatest writer. You don't have to agree with these judgments to recognize that both are towering achievements; that their authors, both Southerners, thought the white South destroyed itself by establishing and seeking to defend slavery; and, crucially, that you cannot actually understand these books if you strip them of their most vile racial slur.

Huckleberry Finn, as even many Americans who have not read it know, is about Huck's trip on a makeshift raft down the Mississippi with "N—— Jim," a slave. Jim is on the run because he has discovered that his owner plans to "sell him down the river" to the murderous cotton plantations of the Deep South. Their trip is famously not just a physical one: Among other things, *Huckleberry Finn* is about Huck's inner journey from thinking of Jim as property to thinking of him as fully human.

About a third of the way through the novel, on one of Huck's forays onto land, Tom Sawyer's Aunt Sally asks Huck about a steamboat accident: "Was anybody hurt?" He answers, "No'm. Killed a n——," to which she responds, "Well, it's lucky; because sometimes people do get hurt."

The exchange comes and goes in a moment. But Twain is signaling that, in the "civilized" white society from which Huck has not yet escaped, for a "n——" to die is for nobody to get hurt. Just, presumably, for something to get damaged. It is only on their primitive raft—the irony is clearly a conscious one on Twain's part—that Jim, exhibiting a dignity greater than that of any other character in the book, can chastise Huck for shabby behavior and that Huck, ashamed, can humble himself to him. It is an unimaginable scene in the psychic economy of the "civilized" antebellum white South, and by far the most moving episode in the book.

If, however, we sanitize this scene—"Was anybody hurt?" "No'm. Killed a black man"—the educational journey of Huck Finn becomes one of developing from thinking of Jim as a man to ... thinking of Jim as a man: that is, no journey at all. Twain understood that slavery could have been remedied only by recognition of the full humanity of black Americans by the white Americans who had enslaved them. He uses America's most famous and most terrible racial slur to help his readers understand what many white Americans did not understand in 1885, when the book was published: that the N-word is an explicit act of dehumanization designed to make it impossible to think of

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black Americans as men and women like any others. In declining to use the word, as NewSouth Books did in 2011 when they reprinted the book using the word "slave" instead, we make nonsense of the most important thematic development in the book.

After the Civil War and 12 years of Reconstruction, white Southerners expressed, through the institution of Jim Crow, their violent resistance to black Americans' emancipation. It was an appalling attempt to reestablish the status quo antebellum that necessitated the long-delayed Civil Rights Act of 1964. Southern whites' delusional nostalgia for a happy antebellum period destroyed by Lincoln's "War of Northern Aggression" rose to the level of mass hysteria during the period of the so-called Lost Cause in the first two decades of the 20th century. Membership of the Ku Klux Klan rose to as high as 3 million.

This was the period during which Faulkner grew up. In 1936 (the year the deeply racist *Gone with the Wind* was published—still, in real terms, the highest grossing movie in history), Faulkner devoted *Absalom! Absalom!* to making exactly the same point Twain had made. The novel climaxes emotionally, intellectually, and philosophically with the following exchange between Henry Sutpen and his best friend, Charles Bon. It comes shortly before Charles is to marry Judith, Henry's sister, but just after Henry has discovered that Charles is not merely his brother, but part black, too:

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"You are my brother."

"No I'm not. I'm the n—— that's going to sleep with your sister. Unless you stop me, Henry."

Which Henry does, with a pistol.



At the start of the book, we know nothing of this familial relationship. This is the puzzle Faulkner sets for us. Why would Henry shoot Charles, whom he loves, just before Charles's wedding to his sister, which he wants more than anything? By the time we arrive at this climactic exchange, we have worked exhaustively with the novel's two narrators through more than 100,000 words of alternative explanations for the murder. None satisfies, until this final possibility: Charles is the unacknowledged son of Henry's father, Thomas, from an earlier marriage. Because Thomas Sutpen's (unnamed) wife is part-black, the narrators theorize, she could, as Sutpen puts it, be neither "adjunctive or incremental" to

his "design"—which is to create the grandest Southern dynasty yet seen. Suddenly, everything makes sense—if "sense" includes the elaborate, race-obsessed fantasies of the white South before, during, and after the Civil War.

How should we understand this climactic exchange? Why is Charles determined to go forward with an incestuous union, rejecting Henry's appeal to their brotherhood? Because Charles has been trying fruitlessly to get their father, Thomas, to admit for four years that he is Thomas Sutpen's older son. Thomas resolutely refuses to offer Charles even a flicker of recognition: His and the Southern "design" cannot accommodate the notion of a part-black inheritor, for it would bring the whole societal structure crashing down. So Charles, not surprisingly, refuses to honor a relationship that the society he lives in refuses to recognize. After all, if he is not his father's son, marrying his father's daughter can't be incest, can it? Hence his despairing reply: "*No I'm not. I'm the n—— that's going to sleep with your sister.*"

But do we *really* need the N-word here? Can we really not have Charles' say "No I'm not. I'm the black man who's going to sleep with your sister"? What about "Black man," capitalized in today's fashionable formulation?

The answer lies in the careful use of "that" instead of "who" in Charles's reply to Henry. For Thomas Sutpen and the white South, as Charles reminds Henry with his brutal and anguished reply, Charles is a *that* instead of a *who*, an object instead of a person—just as Twain's Jim was to Aunt Sally.

The slave economy of the South took metaphysical support from this that/who dichotomy. If we replace the N-word with any term that includes or implies a *man* and therefore a "who" instead of a "that," this dichotomy instantly collapses. For how can a man be a *that* rather than a *who*?

How, indeed? This is the central question of slavery, and it haunts Faulkner's pages as much or more than it does Twain's. Our understanding of slavery remains paramount for our sense of the

history and the future of America, because our vision of the past determines our possibilities in the future. Should we compromise two of America's most extraordinary writers' understanding of this question by bowdlerizing these books, erasing the very word on which their deepest meaning hinges?

Earlier, I spoke of understanding Twain's and Faulkner's novels. But novels pack an *emotional* punch, too, which is why they are, for all but the most rarefied intellects, far more powerful than any philosophical discourse. As Eudora Welty wrote, great fiction shows us "how to feel." In tacitly endorsing the idea that the N-word should be "verboten to whites no matter the context," Milton Academy is failing in its most fundamental duty—to help its students grasp both intellectually and emotionally the truth about the America that was and the America that might be.



The reader will notice I have myself used dashes or a euphemism, when quoting Twain, Faulkner, and even the title of Kennedy's book. But what does Judaism suggest about this issue?

Judaism is famously text-obsessed and famously careful about textual transmission. There are several relevant discussions in the Talmud, including one in *Tractate Pesachim* about euphemisms. Its conclusion is that you must let an uncomfortable text stand if clarity demands it. I hope I have shown that is very clearly the case here.

However, it is also true that, in the Torah, Judaism's most sacred text, there is an important concept known as *Qere* and *Ketiv*, from the Aramaic קָרָא (what is "read") and כָּתוּב (what is "written"). That is, there are a modest number of words that are *written* in the Torah, because we never change the text itself, but *read* differently. A very few of these are euphemisms employed for the sake of clean language. That tradition, applied to literature, would actually recommend against Silvergate's position: Nobody may *say* the N-word in full. But we do have to *print* it in its original form.

Of course, if we wish to avoid the "petty tyranny" that Kennedy laments we have fallen into, and remain a true community of readers, it could be only by making the word utterable by everyone or by no one. *