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|  | Nigger (also spelled niggar): a word that is an alteration of the earlier neger, nigger derives from the French negre, from the Spanish and Portuguese negro, from the Latin niger (black). First recorded in 1587 (as negar), the word probably originated with the dialectal pronunciation of negro in northern England and Ireland. --*Anti-Bias Study Guide,* Anti-Defamation League, 1998  In the United States, "nigger" was first regarded as pejorative in the early nineteenth century. In the era of enslavement, the words "nigger" or "black" were inserted in front of a common American first name (e.g., John), given to a slave to distinguish the slave from any local white person with the same name. While usage of the word in African American culture is complex in that it can be used affectionately, politically, or pejoratively, the epithet is considered an abusive slur when used by white people.  **Langston Hughes** in *The Big Sea* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1940) offered an eloquent commentary:  Used rightly or wrongly, ironically or seriously, of necessity for the sake of realism, or impishly for the sake of comedy, it doesn't matter. Negroes do not like it in any book or play whatsoever, be the book or play ever so sympathetic in its treatment of the basic problems of the race. Even though the book or play is written by a Negro, they still do not like it. The word nigger, you see, sums up for us who are colored all the bitter years of insult and struggle in America.  The word has gained more acceptance in recent years in youth culture through song lyrics and stand-up comedy. Some claim that the word can be defused through reclaiming it. However, most adults continue to view the word as offensive and harmful.  **In the Classroom**  Whether in the context of *Huck Finn* or in any other text in which the word is used, "nigger" raises a number of concerns for both teachers and students when it is used in a classroom setting. When the issues surrounding the word have not been previously addressed in the classroom, it "changes everything," according to parent Danny Elmore. "Five seconds before that word is used, everyone in class might have been your friend. But now you're reassessing yourself, and they're reassessing you. It has a profound effect. Nothing is the same after it is used."  The feelings and reaction of students may depend on the demographics of the student population. In schools that are predominantly African American, students may feel more comfortable with the word, although not necessarily with its repeated use by white characters in a "classic" text. When African American students are in the minority, however, they often feel embarrassed and singled out. Said one African American student in Cherry Hill, "Every time the word came up [during oral reading], everybody turned around to look at me." It's equally important, however, to address the issue regardless of whether the class is racially mixed or homogeneous.  Different teachers handle the word in different ways. Some never use it, and will not allow students to use it. Instead, they skip over it or use a euphemism such as "the 'n' word." Here again race can be a factor. A white teacher, for instance, may be far more reluctant to use the word than a teacher of color, regardless of the class demographics. Nancy Methelis, the English teacher at Boston Latin School featured in the film Born to Trouble: *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn,* explains her decision not to use the word aloud in class:  “Words are among the most powerful things there are. . . . A grown-up, middle-aged white woman using that word gives another level of meaning than a 15-year-old African American student. I think I could hurt students by using it, and I don't feel that my minority students want to hear their white peers use that word either. . . And if it turns out we're sacrificing a little academic rigor in the service of not adding to anyone's pain, maybe that's okay. . . . “  One of Methelis's students, Shantae, adds, "I hear it every day in school, but I just . . . kind of like the fact that [she] didn't use it in class." Chrissy Hayes, an African American student at Cherry Hill East High School, acknowledges that the word is problematic: "There's no way to completely ease the tension when they keep saying 'nigger, nigger, nigger' and you're the only one in the room it could apply to. But even if teachers say 'the n word' instead, it's written right there in the book, and everyone still reads it in their minds."  Kathy Monteiro, a mother who wanted the book removed from the school's required reading list, says, "How can you ask kids to go home and read the word 'nigger' two hundred-something times in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and then expect kids to come back to school and not use the word?"  In deciding how to handle the word, consider how its use in the classroom -- reading it aloud or as part of assigned silent reading -- will affect students. Some educators believe that the word should be said and discussed openly. Professor Maghan Keita says, "Within the framework of the text, if you don't understand how that word can be used, that it's satire [in the case of *Huck Finn*] -- if you don't teach that, you've missed a teaching moment. Our task is to prepare students to think so that when confronted with these words in a text they can see what the author's intent is. What is the meaning of it in *this* text?"  Writer David Bradley agrees. "We cannot avoid being hurt. Language hurts people, reality hurts people. . . . If the word 'nigger' did not have meaning today we wouldn't care that it was in [*Huck Finn*]. The hurt is that it still does have meaning. . . . People sometimes think the book causes things. It only causes things if there are things there that are waiting to happen. If I go into a school or talk to a school administrator who says, well, gee, this book is going to cause all kinds of trouble, I'm going to say, you've already got trouble." |

Reading/Discussion Objective:

\*\*\*What should we, in Havlin’s American Literature class, do about the repeated use of the “N” word when reading aloud and discussing *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*?