

Anti-Imperialism in the United States, 1898-1935

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Mark Twain on "Huck Finn"

Some Emphatic Opinions on Moral and Other Influences in the
Denver Library

New York Tribune (August 22, 1902).

A few days ago it was reported that Mark Twain's book, "Huckleberry Finn," had been barred out of the Denver Public Library. On learning this "The Denver Post" telegraphed to Mark Twain for an expression of his opinion on the subject. He sent the following letter, which is printed in "The Post," which adds, however, that the efforts of the people who were trying to have "Huckleberry Finn" discarded from the library failed, and the book will be restored to the shelves. This is the letter:

Your telegram reached me (per post) from York Village (which is a short brickbat throw from my house) yesterday afternoon when it was thirty hours old. And yet, in my experience, that was not only abnormally quick work for a telegraph company to do, but abnormally intelligent work for that kind of mummy to be whirling off out of its alleged mind.

Twenty-four hours earlier the Country Club had notified me that a stranger in Portsmouth (a half-hour from here) wished me to come to the club at 7:30 p.m., and call him up and talk upon a matter of business. I said: "Let him take the trolley and come over, if his business is worth the time and the fare to him." It was doubtless yourself -- and not in Portsmouth, but in Denver. I was not thinking much about business at the time, for the reason that a consultation of physicians was appointed for that hour (7:30) at my house to consider if means might be devised to save my wife's life. At the present writing -- Thursday afternoon -- it is believed that she will recover.

When the watch was relieved an hour ago and I left the sick chamber to take my respite I began to frame answers to your dispatch, but it was only to entertain myself, for I am aware that I am not privileged to speak freely in this matter, funny as the occasion is and dearly as I should like to laugh at it; and when I can't speak freely I don't speak at all.

You see, there are two or three pointers:

First -- Huck Finn was turned out of a New England library seventeen years

ago -- ostensibly on account of his morals; really to curry favor with a personage. There has been no other instance until now.

Second -- A few months ago I published an article which threw mud at that pinchbeck hero, Funston, and his extraordinary morals.

Third -- Huck's morals have stood the strain in Denver and in every English, German and French-speaking community in the world -- save one -- for seventeen years until now.

Fourth -- The strain breaks the connection now.

Fifth -- In Denver alone.

Sixth -- Funston commands there.

Seventh -- And has dependants and influence.

When one puts these things together, the cat that is in the meal is disclosed -- and quite unmistakably.

Said cat consists of a few persons who wish to curry favor with Funston, and whom God has not dealt kindly with in the matter of wisdom.

Everybody in Denver knows this, even the dead people in the cemeteries. It may be that Funston has wit enough to know that these good idiots are adding another howling absurdity to his funny history; it may be that God has charitably spared him that degree of penetration, slight as it is. In any case, he is -- as usual -- a proper object of compassion, and the bowels of my sympathy are moved toward him.

There's nobody for me to attack in this matter even with soft and gentle ridicule -- and I shouldn't ever think of using a grown up weapon in this kind of a nursery. Above all, I couldn't venture to attack the clergymen whom you mention, for I have their habits and live in the same glass house which they are occupying. I am always reading immoral books on the sly, and then selfishly trying to prevent other people from having the same wicked good time.

No, if Satan's morals and Funston's are preferable to Huck's, let Huck's take a back seat; they can stand any ordinary competition, but not a combination like that. And I'm not going to defend them, anyway.

Sincerely yours,

S. L. Clemens.

York Harbor, Aug. 14, 1902.

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