

Breaking the Mold: Jim in Huck Finn

Many characters in literature have helped express views on racism. The subject of racism is one that transcends all mediums of entertainment. Radio, television, movies, and books have all touched on the subject. Racism is a topic that is sensitive to most, but affects all. In the 1800s, things were no different. A country divided on the subject provided much commentary on the matter, both for it and against it. Mark Twain wrote *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* during this era, and he, like many others, used literature to convey, and express his views on the subject. At the time, the character of Jim, a black runaway slave, was the item of expression for Mark Twain. Many black characters at the time embodied the stereotypes of slaves. Jim, however, was different. In the novel, Jim goes through several events that help construct his mental, personal, and emotional quality as a black character. In *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, the character of Jim is used to break the stereotypes of the average black man and slave at the time.

At the beginning of *Huck Finn*, Jim is portrayed as a very flat, typical “dumb” slave. One of the first incidents we see Jim is in the very beginning of the book. Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn are trying to leave Ms. Watson’s house when they run into Jim. Jim doesn’t see them and falls to sleep under a tree. Tom decides to take Jim’s hat off and put it on the tree above him. Jim, being the “average black man” suddenly makes up this story to explain it; “Afterwards Jim said the witches bewitched him and put him in a trance, and rode him all over the State, then set him under the trees again, and hung his hat on a limb to show who done it.” (Twain 9) This little incident with Jim shows how Twain makes Jim a flat, almost stereotypical character at the beginning of the book. In his criticism of Mark Twain’s novel, Lauriat Lane, Jr. expresses similar sentiments when he states; “Starting with the typically American prejudices and easy generalizations about Jim, he is gradually shocked into an increasingly complex awareness of Jim as a human being.” (Lane) At first, Twain makes the character of Jim very average and stereotypical. However, Guy A. Cardwell, the author of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn: Overview* believes that; “Jim begins and ends as a minstrel-show darkey; but in the book’s center he furnishes authentic pathos, achieves full humanity, and joins Huck as an archetypal figure.” (Cardwell) I agree and disagree with that statement. While Jim does begin as a “darky”, as Cardwell put it, it is not meant to show Jim as a true “darky”. This is used as a tactic to later open the eyes of the reader, in the late 1800s and today. A person at the time would read that little anecdote and think “Just another dumb slave’s story.” But as the book goes on, Jim begins to become a character that is deeper than expected.

As the book progresses, we begin to see more of the mentality and personality of Jim. Jim and Huck begin to move down the Mississippi River. Jim as a runaway slave, and Huck as a person faking his own death. Here is where I believe the real story, and character development of Jim really shines. As the duo traverse down the river, they get into several situations that reveal Jim’s personality. One instance in which we see more of Jim’s personality is when Huck finds a snake skin. Jim tells Huck that it is bad luck, but Huck leaves it where Jim sleeps anyway and the worse happens; “He was barefooted and the snake bit him right on the heel. That all comes

from me being such a fool as to not remember that wherever you leave a dead snake its mate always comes there and curls around it.” (Twain 49) Even though Huck did not listen to Jim, Jim does not get enraged at all. He just lays himself up in the shelter and treats it. This may not seem like a big deal, but it shows a lot about the mentality of Jim. He is coming to be nothing like the stereotypes of slaves and black people at the time. As Brander Matthews explains in his criticism paper entitled *Huckleberry Finn*; “Jim is worthy to rank with these; and the essential simplicity and kindness and generosity of the Southern negro have never been better shown than here by Mark Twain.” (Matthews) This identity of Jim is in complete contrast of the supposed “typical black man”, who is a rebel, a vengeful person, and one that cares for no one but himself and his “people.” Jim did not show these qualities at all. In fact, he was the complete opposite. Jim showed a side that had never been shown before in literature, a black man that was forgiving, and compassionate. Mark Twain, however, does not stop with Jim’s character there. Another incident will make Jim a complete, and round character.

There is one more element to Jim’s character that is revealed later in the story, emotion. Jim has been shown to have a compassionate, caring personality, but the character was not yet complete in Twain’s eyes. Another stereotype of black men was that they had no emotion, or motivation for anything they did. They just followed what they were told, and did it merrily, without any complaint. Jim shows that he does fall under that notion when he runs away, showing great courage and his motivation would later be revealed. When Jim hears a thud, it reminds him of when he hit his daughter. As he continues the story and says; “Oh Huck, I bust out a-cryin’ en grab her up in my arms, en say, ‘Oh, de po’ little thing! De Lord God Almighty forgive po’ ole Jim, kaze he never gwyne forgive hisself as long’s he live!” (Twain 137) This scene with his daughter reveals another, and possibly most important aspect of Jim, his unselfish love. Frances V. Brownell explains further; “His most memorable speeches are characterized by an open honesty and a deep capacity for unselfish love. We recall the wounded love for Huck that brought about Jim’s angry speech quoted above, and the love for his little deaf daughter in that other powerfully dramatic, though brief, in narration.”(Brownell) It is at this point that the character of Jim has completed his mission. The character of Jim is nice and round, and shows attributes that has never really been seen as attributes of black men at the time.

The character of Jim in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* has essentially broken most stereotypes associated with black men, whether free or enslaved. Black people at the time are “supposed” to be vengeful, hateful, rebellious, dumb, and emotionally null. While Jim does show the quality of being dumb sometimes, he is the complete opposite of most stereotypes. He is loving, caring, compassionate, brave, and witty. These are qualities that black people supposedly did not possess. The story, because of the character of Jim, was a big deal for the time it came out. The satire on Southern and American society, and the revolutionary development of the character of Jim was sure to make a big impact. Whether that same impact and importance is still alive today is doubtful, and a topic to be debated. But for the time that it came out, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* was a story like no other. Its comments on society, and its answer to racism through stereotypes was new, exciting, and even controversial to readers and critics alike.

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