

# The humanity behind jim's blackface mask

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“ Humor must not professedly teach, and it must not professedly preach, but it must do both if it would live forever” ~Mark Twain (Gerber 108). Since its publication in 1884, Mark Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* has been a source of much controversy; while some love the book and even consider it to be among the forefront of American literature, others criticize it for its racist language and implications.

However, according to essayist Sacvan Bercovitch, there is one aspect of *Huck Finn* that all readers will agree upon: “ it is a truth universally acknowledged that Mark Twain’s *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is funny” (Bercovitch 90). In a story tackling the grave issue of slavery, humor, especially in the form of blackface, might seem inappropriate. A popular form of entertainment in the mid to late 19th century, blackface minstrelsy featured white performers who provided comedy by literally painting themselves “ black” and mocking black “ humor, dance, speech, and music” (Lott 129). Adopting a strategy of subversion, Twain, through blackface, criticizes racism and stereotypes about blacks by proving that these blackface portrayals are highly inaccurate. Through the character “ N\*\*\*\*\* Jim,” Twain exposes the humanity in black people and the need to treat them accordingly.

Before discussing instances of blackface in *Huck Finn*, one must have an understanding of the history and the defining characteristics of blackface minstrelsy. As author John Strausbaugh notes, the origination of the “ displaying of Blackness for the enjoyment and edification of white viewers” predates the 19th century, when blackface became popular in the United States (Strausbaugh 36). An example of this early form of blackface is the <https://assignbuster.com/the-humanity-behind-jims-blackface-mask/>

racist portrayals of black characters in the performances of Shakespeare's Othello during Elizabethan times. Unlike later American blackface minstrel shows, which were entirely devoted to ridiculing blacks, these earlier cases of blackface constituted only a minor portion of the overall performance and usually were not the main event. Many historians agree that blackface minstrelsy as popular entertainment started with Thomas Rice's " Jump Jim Crow," a song-and-dance routine, in which Rice mockingly imitated an old, crippled slave. Over time, as blackface minstrelsy became increasingly popular, whole troupes of actors specializing in blackface prepared shows that " most often opened with assorted songs, breakdowns, and gags, followed by an ' olio' portion of novelty acts such as malapropistic ' stump speeches' or parodic ' lectures,' and concluded with a burlesque skit set in the South" (Lott 129).

By the 1840s, this format pertained to almost all minstrel shows. Performers of blackface literally blackened their faces with burnt cork, painted their lips a bright red, and wore rags or wigs to complete the blackface transformation. In both appearance and behavior, performers endeavored to cover one or more of the stereotypes of black people. The stock characters of black minstrelsy include the Jim Crow (the classic slave,) the Zip Coon (the free black who tries to act dignified by dressing and speaking fancily,) the Mammy (the strong, independent black woman with much earthly wisdom,) the Uncle Tom (the simple, good, Christian slave,) and the Wench (the overly sexual temptress.) The development of such stock characters and defining acts of blackface minstrelsy marks the emergence of blackface as its own unique genre of entertainment and as a powerful cultural influence on the

American public. Knowing that the purpose of blackface is to debase blacks, one may naturally think that Twain's use of blackface to portray Jim undermines any criticism about slavery; in fact, blackface moments in Huck seem to even promote racism and negative stereotypes about blacks.

A classic example of blackface comes in Chapter 2 after Tom Sawyer pranks Jim by hanging Jim's hat on a tree: " Afterwards Jim said the witches bewitched him and put him in a trance, and rode him all over the State... Niggers would come miles to hear Jim tell about it, and he was more looked up to than any n\*\*\*\*\* in that country. Strange niggers would stand with their mouths open and look him all over, same as if he was a wonder. Niggers is always talking about witches in the dark, by the kitchen fire" (Twain 7-8). In this passage, Huck reports Jim's reaction to the prank. Jim is unaware that he is the victim of a joke and truly believes that " witches bewitched him and put him in a trance." At Jim's expense, Tom and Huck are able to amuse themselves; although Huck never explicitly says that he laughed, readers can assume that he, at the very least, found Jim's ignorance funny because he sees Jim " spread [the story] more and more" and stray farther away from the truth to even more ridiculous conclusions (7).

Jim's overly superstitious behavior and the fact that " niggers would come miles to hear Jim tell about it" are in accordance with " nineteenth century racial discourse," in which " the Negro' was always defined as inherently superstitious" (Smith 6). In other words, this episode resembles a blackface performance in that the stereotypical image of Jim as the superstitious " happy-go-lucky ducky" or the " Jim Crow" character is humorous for Tom and Huck. Huck's amusement encourages the reader to respond similarly and <https://assignbuster.com/the-humanity-behind-jims-blackface-mask/>

join in laughing at Jim. Beyond even simply acknowledging the existence of witches, the slaves begin to almost worship Jim as a religion, “ as if he was a wonder.” Here, Huck’s tone is extremely condescending, and he suggests that Jim is no “ wonder” but a mere slave.

In addition, Huck further displays his racism by constantly referring to slaves as “ niggers.” At first glance, the combination of Huck’s racist language and Jim’s gullibility affirms that “[blacks’] existence appears to participate more of sensation than reflection” (Jefferson 187-188). As such, the blackface scenes in Huck seem to endorse the belief that blacks should be mocked and treated as inferior. Although blackface appears to only intensify the racism against blacks, in Huck Finn, it becomes a means to attack the stereotypes; by allowing Jim to act in a way that breaks free from the limitations set on him by blackface, Twain shows that such a view of blacks is ignorant. In the same passage as before, a closer examination reveals that Tom’s prank becomes a source of power and, to a degree, freedom for Jim: “ Jim was most ruined, for a servant, because he got so stuck up on account of having seen the devil and been rode by witches” (8). To Huck, Tom, and the reader, Tom’s prank has successfully humiliated Jim.

On the other hand, for Jim’s owner Miss. Watson and the other slaves, the prank has empowered Jim. Instead of being subservient, Jim is now “ stuck up” and begins to think highly of himself. Jim’s newfound confidence allows him to question the white authority of his mistress to the degree that he “ was most ruined, for a servant.” In saying that Jim “ was most ruined” for standing up for himself, Huck implies that the best thing for a black is to remain subservient.

Despite such desires to subdue Jim, Jim maintains his control over other slaves, who “ would come from all around there and give Jim anything they had, just for a sight of that five-center piece,” and thereby, causes Miss Watson great trouble. In his own essay on Huck Finn, Eric Lott claims that the prank sets the foundation for Jim’s becoming “ most ruined” and “ unsuited for slavery” (Lott 136). Jim’s ability to benefit from a prank, which was designed to embarrass him, shows that blackface comedy as a way to mock blacks is ultimately ineffective and that the stereotypes blackface promotes are false. In another blackface scene, Twain proves that despite their “ slave dialect,” black people can speak both eloquently and intelligently.

Soon after their close encounter with the robbers on the sinking *Walter Scott*, Huck and Jim launch into a discussion about King Solomon. Unlike in the passage about the prank, the blackface in this excerpt is fueled by Jim’s black dialect: ““ Blame de pint! I reck’n I knows what I knows. En mine you, de real pint is down funder-it’s down deeper. It lays in de way Sollermun was raised. You take a man dat’s got on’y one er two chillen: is dat man gwyne to be waseful o’chillen? No, he ain’t; he can’tFordit” (96). Here, Jim’s dialect is the most important thing to note. His mispronunciations and conspicuously incorrect grammar are exaggerated imitations of black speech. This portrayal of Jim clearly draws from the minstrel show’s stump speech act, in which a blackface actor, speaking in black vernacular, performs a monologue filled with malapropisms and nonsense sentences (Mahar 263). The point of the stump speech was to depict black speech as “ coarse, clumsy, ignorant, and [as standing] at the opposite pole from the soft tones and grace of what was considered cultivated [white] speech” (Mahar 263). Jim not only speaks

in a heavy black accent but also appears to Huck completely confused about “de pint” and, therefore, appears ignorant, as before.

At the same time, however, Jim’s willingness to stand by his beliefs, against what the “widow told [Huck],” comes off as admirable (like Emerson’s self-reliant man) (94). Despite the blackface portrayal of Jim as an inarticulate fool, Jim’s words hold truth and manifest his insightfulness, in this case, about children. His point that Solomon will not care as much for his children because he has so many of them is a simple yet profound one, stemming from Jim’s own experience as a father. In normal blackface comedy, Jim should not have been able to reach this very “real pint” and to logically disprove Huck’s argument. In fact, Huck concedes, “Well he was right; he was always right; he had an uncommon level head, for a n\*\*\*\*\*” (93).

Although Huck qualifies this compliment with “for a n\*\*\*\*\*,” he nonetheless agrees that Jim “was always right,” finally realizing that a “n\*\*\*\*\*” has the capacity to reason and that not all the stereotypes about blacks may be true. By allowing Jim to effectively argue against Huck, Twain rejects the validity of blackface stump speech in representing black locution. As he does in many other instances of blackface in the book, in the fog scene, Twain initially portrays Jim as a blackface character. Drifting along the river, Huck and Jim become separated when a thick fog sets in. After a long night of frantically searching for Jim and the raft, Huck falls asleep and wakes up later that night thinking that he “[had been] dreaming” about the fog (102). Eventually, Huck discovers Jim and the raft and decides to trick Jim into believing, as he initially had, that the incident with the fog had been a dream.

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Confused, Jim asks, “ Well, looky-here, boss, dey’s sumf’n wrong, dey is. Is I me, or who is I? Is I heah, or whah is I? Now dat’s what I wants to know” (103). In this scene, Huck’s reasons for deceiving Jim are unknown; Huck may have wanted to spite the fact that Jim “ was always right” or to conceal his own dependence on and joy in reuniting with Jim. Regardless, through the trick, Huck humiliates and deeply hurts Jim. Jim’s addressing Huck as “ boss,” instead of his more affectionate “ chile” or plain “ Huck,” resembles a slave’s addressing his master. Huck’s prank has essentially transformed Jim into a slave and Huck into the white master.

Jim’s questions present him as the stereotypical “ head-scratching darky” (Woodard and MacCann 145). In fact, Jim is so confused that he is unsure “ whah [he] is.” In this passage, Jim’s absolute perturbation and helplessness undermine his previous demonstrations of reason and humanity. Echoing his message from the King Solomon scene, Twain, by having Jim reprimand Huck, once again suggests that blacks are equal to or even superior to whites. When Huck reveals the truth about the prank, Jim angrily responds: “ En when I wake’ up en fine you back agin, all safe en soun’, de tears come... En all you wuz thinkin’ bout, wuz how you could make a fool uv ole Jim wid a lie. Dat truck dah is trash; en trash is what people is dat puts dirt on de head er dey fren’s en make’em ashamed” (105).

Here, Jim speaks in the characteristic “ slave dialect.” Ironically, at the same time that Jim’s extremely heavy dialect puts him in blackface, his dialect also becomes a way to capably scold Huck. In talking about how “ de tears come” to his eyes when he first saw Huck, Jim appeals to Huck’s guilt in wronging one who so greatly cares about him. Logically, Jim first establishes the

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obvious point that “ dat truck dah is trash” because the “ truck” is worthless garbage. Then, in the same logic, because Huck’s action of “ put[ting] dirt on de head er dey fren’s” by duping Jim is as lowly as “ truck,” Huck is “ trash.” Huck is no better than the “ truck” left on the raft by the storm.

Essentially, Jim calls Huck “ trash” and suffers no consequences by doing so. Instead, his criticism of Huck’s actions causes Huck to “ humble [himself] to a n\*\*\*\*\*” (105). Literary critic Bernard W. Bell reads Huck’s contrition as “ Twain’s moral identification with both Jim and Huck” (Bell 137). In other words, Twain himself supports the idea that blacks are near equals to or superiors to whites and so, should not be treated as objects of humor.

This belief that blacks deserve “ no more mean tricks” is a direct attack on blackface and whites’ treatment of blacks and marks the climax of Twain’s subversion of blackface (105). In addition to undermining blackface through Jim’s humane actions, Twain actually satirizes blackface as cowardly entertainment that conceals the truth that blacks are just as “ human” as whites. With the arrival of the king and the duke, Huck and Jim involuntarily cede control over their raft and their lives to these two charlatans. When Jim complains that his disguise as a captured slave (during the times when the king and the duke and Huck are on land) is much too tiresome, the duke devises a ridiculous plan: “ and then he took his theatre-paint and painted Jim’s face and hands and ears and neck all over a dead dull solid blue, like a man that’s been drowned nine days. Blamed If he warn’t the horriblest looking outrage I ever see. Then the duke took and wrote out a sign on a shingle, so- Sick Arab- but harmless when not out of his head (203).

The duke's painting "Jim's face and hands and ears" with "a dead dull solid blue" clearly resembles the white performer's covering himself with burnt cork. The fact that this paint is called "theatre-paint" is also important as this name brings to mind a minstrel show (a type of theater). As such, one can understand Jim's "arabface" to be a parody of blackface. Huck's initial thought after seeing Jim in "arabface" is that Jim looked "like a man that's been drowned nine days." Here, Twain seems to be saying that just as "arabface" makes Jim look "drowned" or dead, so blackface falsely portrays blacks as dead, in terms of their humanity.

Huck's reaction also reveals one of the most basic truths about blackface: that the blackface portrayal is not at all accurate. After all, Huck perceives Jim in "arabface" as a drowned man, not as an Arab. For Jim, "arabface" is a way to scare away "anybody come meddling around" from discovering that he is a runaway slave. In the same way, blackface works to hide the truth that blacks are not inferior to whites. According to Huck, Jim's "arabface" and, consequently, blackface is "the horriblest looking outrage." The word "outrage" is key as it can mean "a gross indignity or affront" (OED).

Speaking through Huck, Twain essentially calls blackface "a gross indignity" to black people. Through Huck's commentary on "arabface," Twain even comes to mock whites who believe in the conspicuously faulty portrayals of blacks in blackface: "Which was sound enough judgment; but you take the average man, and he wouldn't wait for him to howl" (204). The "average man," in this case, represents the white audience of a blackface show. The fact that the "average man wouldn't wait for him to howl" implies that the white audience is too scared to accept the truth. Without anything so much

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as a “ howl,” the white audience is ready to believe in the reality of blackface portrayals. In addition, the inability of the “ average man” or the white audience to look through Jim’s disguise displays its gullibility and ignorance.

Ultimately, through “ arabface,” Twain scorns blackface’s authenticity and the white audience’s cowardice and weakness. Amidst these blackface scenes, Twain inserts moments of seriousness, through which he further criticizes slavery and the views maintained by blackface. By shifting to this sober tone, Twain renders his criticisms more forceful and his overall argument against slavery stronger. Hearing Jim pine for his family, Huck notes, “ and I do believe he cared just as much for his people as white folks does for theirn” (201). With one short sentence, Huck dismantles the idea that blacks are naturally inferior to whites, a concept supported by blackface comedy.

Instead of labeling Jim as a “ n\*\*\*\*\*” as he did before, Huck, here, refers to Jim as “ he.” This “ he” is significant because it does not indicate race. By using such a race-neutral word, Huck may be unknowingly saying that the color of one’s skin is not important. While Huck has made huge leaps in correcting his racist mindset, he still considers “ white folks” to be the paragons of virtue. In claiming that Jim cares “ as much for his people as white folks for theirn,” Huck pays Jim the highest compliment he can think of.

In a sense, Huck’s statement is also ironic since later scenes with the Phelps and the King and the Duke reveal white people’s hypocritical behavior and exploitations of each other. Essentially, Huck is placing Jim on an equal level as white people, completely undermining blackface’s goal to emphasize

white superiority. Through Huck's voice, Twain introduces the idea that blacks and whites are not as different as blackface and common racist stereotypes testify. As Huck Finn enters its final stage, known as the evasion chapters, the absurdity and frequency of blackface moments increase, and Jim's development into a full human being seems to regress. When Huck reveals to Tom his intentions of helping Jim escape from his captivity on the Phelps's plantation, Tom offers his services.

Instead of devising a practical plan of escape, Tom contrives an elaborate plan, similar to those of fictional characters like "Baron Trench, [or] Casanova, [or] Benvenuto Chelleeny" (299). The victim of Tom's unwarranted attention, Jim again takes on the role of the blackface clown as he endeavors to follow Tom's plan: So we told Jim how we'd have to smuggle in the rope-ladder pie, and other large things...And told him how to keep a journal on the shirt with his blood, and all that. He told him everything. Jim couldn't see no sense in the most of it, but he allowed we was white folks and knowed better than him; so he was satisfied and said he would do it all just as Tom said (309). At Jim's expense, Tom is able to amuse himself and has "the best fun he ever had in his life" (310).

Meanwhile, Jim suffers greatly and is forced to "keep a journal on the shirt with his blood" in order to satisfy Tom's definition of "bully" (338). Other such ludicrous things that Tom makes Jim do include "raising the mullen, and jewsharping the rats, and petting and flattering up the snakes and spiders" (328). The ridiculousness of such actions reminds readers of the minstrel show's burlesque skit, which typically takes place in the South. Clearly, complying with Tom's demands does not facilitate Jim's escape. In <https://assignbuster.com/the-humanity-behind-jims-blackface-mask/>

fact, by faithfully performing such demeaning actions, Jim adds to the burlesque humor of the situation, makes himself the subject of laughter (for readers,) and comes off as the ever-loyal “ Uncle Tom.

” Although Jim “ couldn’t see no sense” in what Tom tells him to do, he does not speak up about it. His lack of voice in this passage is a sharp contrast to his eloquence in the King Solomon and the fog scenes. Rather than assert his beliefs, Jim shows signs of the subservient “ Jim Crow” character when he simply accepts the two boys’ advice because they were “ white folks.” Here, Jim himself seems to believe in white superiority, and he passively accepts his position as a slave. Jim no longer expresses intense desires to be free or to be with his family. Charles H.

Nilon takes Jim’s servile behavior to be the result of “ the [lack] of value Tom places in [Jim]” (Nilon 27). Jim’s subservience and comical actions (forced upon him by Tom) present Jim as a typical blackface character. On a larger level, Jim’s regression in these final chapters almost implies that such blackface traits are inherent and natural in all blacks. In his usual manner, Twain, however, utilizes Jim’s blackface image as a springboard to accentuate Jim’s humanity and ability to transcend those stereotypes. Jim evinces his humanity and great character when he risks his freedom in order to bring medical aid for Tom: “ Well, den dis is de way it looks to me, Huck.

Ef it wuz him dat ‘ uz bein’ sot free, en one er de boys wuz to git shot, would he say, ‘ Go on en save me, nemmine ‘ bout a doctor f’r to save dis one? Is dat like mars Tom Sawyer? Would he say dat? You bet he wouldn’t! Well den- is Jim gwyne to say it? No, sah- I doan’ budge a step out’n dis place, ‘ dout a

doctor; not ef it's forty year!" (340-341). Finally free, Jim steps onto the raft and is ready to depart when Tom brags that he has been shot. Upon hearing this news, Jim says that he will not " budge a step out'n dis place, ' dout a doctor." Essentially, Jim is sacrificing his freedom for Tom, whose grandiose plan had, in the first place, led to his wound and compromised Jim's escape. Jim explains that he will not leave Tom behind by himself because he believes that had Tom been the one escaping, Tom would never tell his injured comrade to " go on en save me, nemmine ' bout a doctor." Jim's calling Tom " mars Tom Sawyer" further reveals that Jim considers Tom to be above him, as a model of excellence and virtue.

Of course, what is ironic is that, as seen by the danger his quest for fun puts Jim and Huck in, Tom is incredibly selfish. Contrary to his quietness and submissiveness when he was a captive at the Phelps's, Jim, in this scene, strongly makes clear with " not ef it's forty year" that he will not abandon Tom. Unlike before, Tom and Huck are the ones who now submit to Jim's will. In this case, Jim's " black dialect" is not supposed to act as a stump speech and cause Jim to be laughed at. Instead, Jim's heavy accent heightens the great passion and resolution behind his words, making him seem that much more honorable.

By making such a selfless and moral decision, Jim proves that he is morally better than the white characters in Huck Finn and completely subverts his previous image as the simple and inferior slave. On another level, Jim's blackface portrayal in these final chapters serves as Twain's satire on the failure of Reconstruction. Author of *Was Huck Black?*, Shelley Fisher Fishkin argues that the evasion chapters " dramatize both the spectacular boldness

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of the promise of liberty and justice for all, and the nation's spectacular failure to make that promise a reality" (Fishkin 74). When Fishkin talks about the "promise," she is referring to the Republican Party's hope that Reconstruction would successfully integrate the newly freed slaves into American society and abolish slavery forever in the South (Fishkin 70). By 1876, however, when Twain was writing *Huck Finn*, "the freedom of African Americans was sharply curtailed not only by sharecropping, lynching, and the convict-lease system, but also by direct action of the Federal government" (Fishkin 73). In *Huck Finn*, Jim's failure to achieve true freedom and leave behind his blackface image symbolizes Reconstruction's failure.

Even after being freed from chains, Jim maintains his blackface character: "Jim was pleased most to death, and busted out, and says: 'Dah now, Huck, what I tell you? -what I tell you up dah on Jackson Islan'? I tole you I got a hairy breas', en what's de sign un it" (360). In this passage, Jim is "pleased" because Tom has just paid him forty dollars for being "so patient" a prisoner (360). According to Charles H. Nilon, Tom's treatment of Jim parallels white treatment of blacks in the post-Reconstruction era. Just as Tom only cares about Jim in so much as Jim provides entertainment, so these "[white] people in the South [in] preparing the former slaves for freedom were concerned to provide profit and pleasure for themselves" (Nilon 22).

Ultimately, Reconstruction failed because of the Toms living in the South. Instead of being outraged that Tom values Jim's pride at no more than forty dollars, Jim feels lucky. In fact, Jim is more than just pleased; he is pleased "most to death." The word "busted" implies that Jim's excitement is so great that he cannot control himself from bragging to Huck. Jim's extreme  
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happiness, in this scene, is ironic because Tom's paying him off is more demeaning than thoughtful.

In addition to this "happy-go-lucky darky" image, Jim comes off as the stereotypically superstitious slave when he credits his "hairy breas'" for Tom's money. In a way, Jim's blackface portrayal at the very end of the novel circles back to the one in the beginning, when he was on "Jackson Island." This circling back may be Twain's critique of how race relations did not change much after Reconstruction (as opposed to before Reconstruction). By portraying Jim as a blackface character in the last chapter of *Huck Finn*, Twain mocks the failure of Reconstruction and brings to light the need to fix this existing problem of race relations. Throughout *Huck Finn*, Twain portrays Jim as a blackface character. As Jim is already black, Twain cannot literally put Jim into blackface; instead, Twain emphasizes in Jim certain "black" traits, like gullibility, dialect, subservience, and superstition, that blackface performers usually mocked.

As a result, Jim often is the subject of laughter and appears inferior to the white characters in the book. Interestingly, however, Twain places moments where Jim demonstrates his great humanity after these blackface scenes. By doing so, Twain is able to undermine the effects of blackface and criticize the stereotypes that blackface supports. At a time when most of the country either opposed or became tired of Reconstruction and its plans for upholding black rights, Twain, through the subversion of blackface in *Huck Finn*, continued to criticize the state of race relations (Fishkin 72). While Twain is among the few in the late 19th century to criticize the treatment of blacks,



he also bends to social pressures, to a degree. After all, his criticism through blackface is quite indirect.

On this point, Bell finds Twain's desire not to isolate himself from his "readers [who] were passive or active participants in the rising tide of racial, political, and economic oppression, terrorism, and exploitation that swept the nation in the 1870's and 1880's" to be one of the reasons for this indirect blackface criticism (Bell 133). Not until his later essays like the "United States of Lyncherdom" does Twain finally emerge from behind his own mask and more directly attack the racism against blacks.