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## From Jim to James: Retelling the Adventures for Freedom

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### Abstract

*James* is a retelling of the classic American fiction, *Adventures of Tom Sawyer* by Mark Twain. Percival Everett the author portrays the experiences of the negro slave Jim who accompanies Huck and thereby posits a peep into the slave's experiences from his perspective. Written in a mocking tone, and by switching over dialects Everett projects the hell like life of a slave in America. Jim is in a journey towards self-exploration and identity assertion. His adventure is for possessing a name other than Jim. He is skilled and assertive. The paper analyses the portrayal of identity formation in slaves and how Jim succeeded in overcoming the sense of inferiority instilled on him by the Whites.

**Keywords:** Slavery, Identity, Retelling, Reading, Christianity

Any analysis of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, a revered literary work in America, inevitably delves into the historical context of American literature and its contemporary evolution. An extensive examination of the scholarly literature focused on *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* would yield useful insights about the development and chronicle of literary critique in the United States. It consistently appears whenever a moment of disagreement, disruption, or objection occurs in the critical discussion, which it then stimulates dialectically. In 1935, Hemingway made a remark about the inherent strength of the novel and its ability to create and inspire. Since its initial publication in England, this work has consistently provoked debates and disagreements among reviewers and the general public. Librarians and the NAACP sought to prohibit it. Van Wyck Brooks and Bernard DeVoto criticized Twain. In 1948, Leslie Fiedler summoned Huck back to the raft through his work *Come Back to the Raft Ag'in, Huck Honey*, in order to present a more comprehensive argument regarding American literature and the

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United States as a whole. Leslie Fiedler's essay examines the portrayal of men isolated in the forest as a fundamental symbol of the American experience. T.S. Eliot and Lionel Trilling sparked a heated argument about the ending of the book, which marked the start of a highly contentious issue. Subsequently, a continuous dispute has ensued regarding the final outcome of the book and other associated topics, such as Twain's utilization of language and the usage of the N-word. This debate has caused a division among scholars, with some, such as Leo Marx and Richard Poirier, opposing the inclusion of certain aspects, while others, like James Cox, embrace it. In a 1996 piece published in Harper's, Jane Smiley contended that it was imperative to "displace books off the bedside table and replace them with *Uncle Tom's Cabin*".

Percival Everett, a highly inventive and esteemed American novelist, has effectively addressed these contentious debates by expertly and methodically reinterpreting Twain's narrative in his most recent publication, appropriately named *James*. By engaging in the process of rewriting, Everett not only transformed and revitalized the book, but also salvaged Twain's original novel. Contrary to common assumption, he is not the first person to try such a significant and challenging task. Several authors have reinterpreted the tale from a different perspective. Saul Bellow's novel *Henderson The Rain King*, Greg Matthews's *The Further Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Nancy Rawles's *My Jim*, Jon Clinch's *Finn: A Novel*, and Robert Coover's, *Huck Out West* in 2017 are instances. In 1970, John Seelye, a distinguished literary critic and English professor at the University of Florida, authored a book called *The True Adventures of Huckleberry Finn: As Told By John Seelye*. This work might be characterized as a proficient and perceptive reinterpretation of the original text. Seelye effectively completed the tale in a manner that is believable and acknowledges both Twain's achievements and the historical setting. The conclusion portrays Huck as the sole occupant of the raft, while Jim perishes as a result of his efforts to liberate himself from his restraints. Huck experiences a profound sense of loneliness and unhappiness throughout the dark hours of the Mississippi night, yet he stays apathetic towards the prospect of the sun's rise. Seelye adopted Huck's point of view to recount the story, employing his own interpretation of the colloquial language and preserving the use of the N-word.

Everett authored a new work and, reimagined the novel from Jim's vantage point, assuming the dual role of narrator and protagonist. In the beginning of the novel, he starts by directly speaking to Huck and Tom Sawyer, referring to them as "those little bastards" (9), while standing in the yard and thus indicates the target of his mockery. This statement solidifies Jim's authorship of the narrative and underscores the profound connection between language, narrative, what he terms as "the potency of literature," appropriation, and portrayal. These topics, while not always the main theme of the work, are indispensable. "My name is James. I wish I could tell my story with a sense of history as much as industry . . . I am a man . . . a man who can read and write, a man who will not let his story be self-related, but self-written" (Everett 93). The matter at hand extends beyond an individual's ability or skills. This refers to the claim that an individual has the ability to comprehend written text, compose written content, tell their own story, and communicate effectively. Furthermore, it suggests that the individual

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has the intellectual ability and cognitive capabilities. Jim's goal is to utilize his intellect in a discerning way to achieve liberation for himself, his family, and a few of his fellow enslaved individuals. The protagonist can only accomplish this by prevailing over what he explicitly labels as the "enemy" instead of the "oppressor," as the latter term suggests the presence of a victim, which he is not, as seen by the novel's conclusion.

The importance of reading and writing, as underscored by Frederick Douglass, was profound. He considered it to be the most potent instrument that a slave could possess, and it inspired terror in the white masters. Alternatively, it might be understood as a method of expressing oneself by referring to oneself.

"I had wondered every time I sneaked into in there what white people would do to a slave who had learned how to read? What would they do to a slave who had taught other slaves to read? What would they do to a slave who knew what a hypotenuse was, what irony meant, how retribution was spelled?". (Everett 48)

While the importance of this assertion should not be undervalued, it has the potential to turn into another case of self-praise, cantered around an individual who, after a lengthy journey, has gained the capacity to act autonomously and ultimately achieved personal freedom by the end of the book.

At that moment the power of reading made itself clear and real to me. If I could see the words, then no one could control them or what I got from them. They couldn't even know if I was merely seeing them or reading them, sounding them or comprehending them. It was a completely private affair and completely free and, therefore completely subversive. (Everett 73)

Jim teaches kids "language lessons" (22) as "these were indispensable. Safe movement through the world depended on the mastery of language, fluency" (22). He provides them with a asset of instructions like "don't make eye contact, never speak first, never address any subject directly when talking to another slave, slaves should never name anything, mumble sometimes so the whites can have satisfaction of thinking that the slaves are stupid (23). February, a kid succinctly sums up Jim's lesson: "Da mo, betta dey feels, da mo, safer we be" (23). The inclusion of terms like signification, situational irony, proleptic irony, and dramatic irony enhances the satirical impact. Jim's assessment of the Whites is thus: "White people believe all sorts of stuff I don't know about. Dey is the stupidstioussest people in da world" (40). Unlike Jim, who remains unchanged throughout the book and ultimately becomes James by the conclusion, James, the narrator, is cognizant that slavery was predominantly a global institution that facilitated an economy motivated by financial gain. This system oppressed those with dark complexion, regarding them as possessions and goods.

James' historical memory and knowledge of his old world have been irreversibly severed. This occurred on two occasions, during two transactions, where he was regarded as an object rather than a subject. the slave system fostered a culture that deliberately disregarded the presence of other individuals. Simultaneously, it exalted and commemorated personal

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achievement rooted in material belongings, affluence, and “assets,” all justified through a self-serving interpretation of Christianity. Everett has used satire to critique Western concepts of equality by having Jim engage in fictional exchanges with Voltaire, allowing for discussions regarding Rousseau and Locke. Voltaire explains to Jim: “That is what equality is, Jim. It’s the capacity for becoming equal” (49). This resulted in the ridicule, devaluation, separation, and invisibility of those who were instrumental in achieving that success.

I was even more afraid of further unproductive imagined conversations with Voltaire, Rousseau, and Locke, about slavery, race, and of all things, albinism. How strange a world, how strange an existence, that one’s equal must argue for one’s equality, that one’s equal must hold a station that allows airing of that argument, that one cannot make the argument for oneself, that premises of said argument must be vetted by those equals who do not agree. (52)

Everett’s approach to the beginning of the novel diverges from Twain in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. The text incorporates the lyrics of minstrel show songs and offers a fresh development in the storyline, wherein Jim is acquired by Daniel Decatur Emmett’s minstrel show troupe, known as the Virginia Minstrels. This episode reveals the contradictory stance of liberals toward slavery and serves as a reminder of every citizen’s duty to confront injustice. Undoubtedly, in the 1840s, the era in which Twain’s book is set, the minstrel show was a much favoured cultural event that skilfully tackled the subject of slavery for white individuals, while successfully hiding its true nature. In the introduction, James states that it is consistently beneficial to accommodate the preferences of white folks. “White folks expect us to sound a certain way and it can only help if we don’t disappoint them . . . the only ones who suffer when they are made to feel inferior is us” (22). Moreover, the minstrel performance provides the novelist with a method to reveal the cruel and violent truth of slavery, from which it evolved.

James mentions renowned classics of Western literature, narratives, and authors as parodic instruments. Voltaire’s *Treatise on Tolerance*, Rousseau’s *Discourse on Inequality*, the Bible, *Aladdin and the Magic Lamp*, and writers like Walter Scott, Locke are mentioned humorously. He comments: “The Bible itself was the least interesting of all. I could not enter it, did not want to enter it, and then understood that I recognised it as a tool of my enemy. I chose the word enemy, and still do, as oppressor necessarily supposes a victim” (90). Jim perceived the Genie as being white. His sole desire was the emancipation of every enslaved individual. Jim could relate to only one pamphlet titled *The Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Venture, a Native of Africa: But Resident above Sixty Years in the United States of America*.

Everett systematically and artistically disassembles that reality with precise precision. He reveals the contradictions, inconsistencies, and falsehoods of it. He analyzes and breaks down the story of America as the ultimate symbol of freedom and a nation believed to be chosen by a higher power, which is supported by white supremacist rhetoric.

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“There’s religion but there’s no God of theirs. Their religion tells that we will get our reward in the end. However, it apparently doesn’t say anything about their punishment . . . there might be some higher power, children” he continues when another child Virgil, says that there must be something, “but it’s not their white God. However, the more you talk about God and Jesus and heave and hell, the better they feel.” (23)

Twain’s utilization of irony is apparent in Everett’s grave subject matter from the very beginning, as James and his fellow enslaved individuals deliberate over the destiny of an escaped slave on a nearby plantation. Likewise, the horror portrayed in the original text no longer incorporates the gothic qualities that impacted “classic” American literature from Poe to Faulkner and their intricate and unsettling depiction of Blackness. James portrays horror in his work as the historical conditions and circumstances that Jim and his fellow slaves suffer, encompassing both physical and mental aspects. This modification allows Everett to achieve a goal that Twain, a progressive follower of Calvinism, was unable to attain, regardless of his location - whether it was his hometown of southern Illinois, Buffalo where he wrote a substantial part of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Europe, Elmira, or Connecticut. In part two of the story, James and Norman, both light-skinned Black members of the Virginia Minstrels who can pass as white, find themselves at a sawmill. The sawmill was consistently unclean and had a pungent odour of animal and human excrement rather than the scent of sawdust. There were a total of seven slaves engaged in using axes and adzes, while an additional two slaves were operating a pit saw. Several men in the sawmill had enough fingers missing to be considered one handed. James, who worked in the mill described his work as extremely unpleasant and lived in constant fear of losing a finger or hand. The overseer Henderson is described as “fair” because he beat all of them same, nothing more or less.

This fictional representation of historical events deliberately rejects the act of concealing our past in order to present James as a well-rounded figure and to construct his new identity accordingly. Amidst these conditions, he clarifies to Sammy, the woman, whom he and Norman escape the sawmill with, that he has no inclination to “be white.” The speaker articulates a fervent wish to disassociate himself from a specific collective. They acknowledge experiencing profound terror when Henderson and his group encountered them and discharged firearms. Ultimately, they managed to secure their safety by seizing a log and into the river. Nevertheless, the river, previously seen as a sanctuary from civilization, has transformed into a location characterized by aggression and fatalities for Black Americans. This further strengthens the idea that America is comparable to a jail for them. Sammy, who was fatally wounded by Henderson’s henchmen, had a second death in the river. However, this time he perished while being liberated, as reported by James to Norman. James harbors a long-standing and intensified feeling of wrath that he has cultivated for almost twenty years when confronted with mortality, a response that is typical for many in his circumstances. These fictitious activities not only depict historical events but also function as a historical reference. Everett adeptly integrates the Civil War into the novel’s chronology, establishing the backdrop for the book’s concluding section.

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The concluding paragraph could perhaps serve as an extended short tale or even a complete novel in its own regard. Everett's work reaches its pinnacle in a thorough resolution that includes historical, poetic, and critical components. The analysis begins by exploring the relationship between Jim and Huck, which not only exposes Jim's moral values but also serves as a method to educate Huck about the essential stages of personal growth. The story begins on the beach, not the river, where Jim delivered Norman's lifeless body after the steamboat's engine, on which they had embarked, detonated and submerged. Jim was faced with the dilemma of deciding whether to save Huck, who had also found himself on the steamboat, or Norman. The meeting of the two protagonists is undeniably crucial in order to bring the drama to a close. Nevertheless, it is clear that Huck's reappearance in the novel is directly caused by the shift in narrative emphasis. James is the narrator of the story, not Huck. Therefore, it is James who is telling the story. Thus, Huck's presence in James's narrative allows for the creation of Huck's own story, rather than the other way around. When Huck asks why James decided to save him instead of Norman, James discloses that he is his biological child. He clarifies that he and Huck's mother were childhood acquaintances who developed a strong connection and grew up together. He was incapable of saving both Norman and his son. Confronted with a decision, he chose to save his son. Initially, in the narrative, Hick safeguarded Jim from being falsely accused of theft. Subsequently, he informed the Duke and the King that he was their slave, once again attempting to shield him, despite the discomfort caused by acknowledging Huck's friendship with James. However, despite James' efforts to let Huck perceive the world from his perspective, Huck is not yet able to fully comprehend it. In the beginning of the narrative, when Huck inquired James about his belief in God, James promptly said, "sho nuff I does. If dere ain't no God, den how do we get this here wonderful life?" (24-25). When Huck accuses James of being dishonest, James emphasizes the importance of taking responsibility and telling the truth. Huck responds by vehemently declaring that James is a "liar" and emphatically stating that he is not his son asserting "I ain't no nigger" (257).

Despite the answer being painful, it symbolizes the loss of Huck's innocence and marks the final occasion he will use that offensive racial slur, due to this same reason, Huck can now assert that James is dependent on him if he wishes to return to Hannibal, liberate his family, and travel towards the north. James, who eloquently acknowledges his own quiet at one point in the novel, but has never experienced self-deception, comprehends this to be accurate. Upon arriving at Miss Watson's residence, the two individuals discover the distressing news that James' wife and daughter have been sold. This revelation prompts James to burst into tears. Subsequently, He directs his gaze towards Huck and comprehends that "for the very first time in his life he was actually seeing me" (204). Consequently, it is not surprising that when James seeks assistance from Huck and the later responds by stating that he is just a child. James confronts him: "You're a man, Huck. You can find out who bought them and where they went" (214).

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Huck's naivety reaches its culmination here, making James a pivotal event in literary chronicles. Furthermore, this is the same reason why James is able to continue and conclude the story, even delving into the realm of the fantastical, a genre in literature that has historically been used by writers to depict moments of disruption and impending transformations. Consequently, James's ability to speak two languages, namely ordinary English and slave speech, which has been a defining aspect of his dual identity, ceases to exist once he employs it twice more. This highlights the underlying cause for America's resistance towards languages other than English. Initially, in order to deceive the overseer, the "creature" that he observed engaging in sexual assault with another female slave is subsequently asphyxiated by James. Furthermore, he proceeds to abduct Judge Thatcher, to whom he ambiguously states, indicating uncertainty about "ain't 'cided, Massa whether he will take his life or not. He then observes, "I had never seen a white man filled with such fear. The remarkable truth, however, was that it was not the pistol, but my language, the fact that I didn't conform to his expectations, that I could read, that had so disturbed and frightened him" (290). Upon receiving information from the Judge that his wife and daughter are located in the town of Medina, situated to the western part of the Mississippi River, the protagonist successfully makes his way there and liberates a group of enslaved individuals, intentionally referring to them as "men." Firstly, because to their gender, and secondly, due to their necessity to listen, the slaves, like Huck, have also transitioned from being boys. However, their transition is driven by distinct factors.

The central point is that for Huck to mature and transition into adulthood, it is crucial for the environment around him to change. This transformation must begin with the cessation of devaluing other individuals. To achieve the transformed identity, James must declare his name and intentions to the other black men. He offers them the choice to join him in seeking freedom or to remain where they are. He emphasizes that staying behind would result in death, either by remaining oppressed or by fighting for freedom. The significance of this event at the end of the novel lies in the detailed description of James' method of killing the overseer: "All those with me stopped and watched the man receive the lead. His chest exploded red on his nightclothes. He did not fall like a tree. Nothing about him was that big. He merely fell, face-first, into a darkness none of us could see" (302)

By removing the overseer, James unintentionally caused the downfall of Jim and the world he had been trapped in for a long time. The cover of the book shows a determined, strong black man wading through a river while carrying a bundle. The bundle contained books. The story of Jim begins when he finally has access to paper and ink for the first time in his life. He writes his first word and declares himself as Jim, but he is still searching for a meaningful name. The novel explores the significance of names and the adventurous journey of finding one.

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