
The Use of Language and Reasoning in Huck's Dialogues with Jim

Throughout the novel, nothing else brings out the character of Huck Finn and Jim as their dialogue does. Being stuck together as friends on a raft floating on the Mississippi, there is nothing that draws Huck closer to Jim than their dialogue as he tries to get his friend to freedom. Huck, being inquisitive and concerned about his friend, becomes explorative and free in his speech. Jim, on the other hand, exercises more freedom but with added meaning in his speech than Huck. When Huck speaks, he speaks his opinions; when Jim speaks, his words are of sincere emotion. Their defiance of social obligation, lazy speech, and often indirect thoughts toward each other provides a quality of easy friendship—morally right, socially wrong.

Because Huck and Jim come from two distinct, separate faces of society, the use of intermediate, colloquial language serves to bridge a gap between Huck and Jim. Huck's reasoning, though it is not stated explicitly, is that to be friends, Huck must drop down to Jim's level: he begins to use more informal and colloquial expressions than if he had been talking to another white person. As Huck narrates the story, he speaks in a different type of Southern dialect than the one he uses to talk to Jim with; the dialect he narrates the story with is much more clear and concise. When he speaks to Jim, however, his speech drastically changes. Huck begins to grow lazy in minding his expressions, and uses language as "Ain't" and "Blamed if I would" (42-43). The purpose for Huck's change of language can be seen through the effects it produces; Jim listens to him more readily, and both find themselves more at ease in each other's company.

Sedentary language is a product of an easy, carefree lifestyle. There is a special quality to colloquialisms and other forms of informal language; these usages of language lack the strain of trying to be formal or careful. As Huck and Jim speak what is on their minds, their dialogue produces a relaxed atmosphere free of tension--ironic when viewed against what Huck and Jim are supposed to feel toward each other.

Huck and Jim are separated by an endless social gulf--one is white and free, the other black and a runaway slave. The expected reaction when these two sides meet is general enmity; however, instead of a white person dominating a black person or an adult dominating a child, a mutual friendship grows. Through their dialogues together, Huck reasons that Jim is more of a human being than most people give him credit for, that he has feelings and can be hurt like anyone else. Eventually, Huck begins to view Jim as a kind of surrogate parent and friend. Through Huck's long process of reasoning, the reader can glimpse Huck's mind to see how he copes with living beside a social enemy. Reasoning, Huck wants to be Jim's friend, but must also consider that Jim is a slave. Should he turn Jim in, do the "right" thing, or help him cross over to the free states, which is the moral thing to do? Or in Jim's situation, should he be able to trust Huck with his desire to be free? With both Huck and Jim, reasoning serves to squeeze out their true moral and emotional characters.

The dialogue between Huck and Jim provides a message to the reader; no matter what the nature of the great racial divide is, Huck will always be Jim's friend. By reasoning that Jim is an "equal," trying to descend from a domineering usage of language to a more mutual attitude, Huck defies social obligation and builds a long-lasting friendship through his dialogues with Jim.

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