

“You don’t know about me”, “but that ain’t no matter”: la exitosa invención del narrador pícaro Huckleberry en la novela de Mark Twain Las Aventuras de Huckleberry Finn (1884)

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Resumen

El siguiente artículo se centra en la invención del personaje pícaro a través de la figura de Huckleberry Finn. Para ello se seguirá al protagonista de la novela de Mark Twain en su descenso a través del río Mississippi, testificando los valores de la sociedad sureña, en contraposición a la evolución de las reflexiones morales del joven Huckleberry sobre la situación de la comunidad negra en la época próximamente anterior a la guerra civil estadounidense.

Palabras clave: Guerra Civil Americana, Literatura estadounidense, Novela, Racismo, Realismo.

Title: “You don’t know about me”, “but that ain’t no matter”: the successful invention of the rogue narrator Huckleberry in Mark Twain’s Adventures of Huckleberry Finn (1884).

Abstract

The following article focuses on the invention of the rogue character through the figure of Huckleberry Finn. In order to do that, the reader will follow the protagonist of the Mark Twain’s novel in his descent through the Mississippi River, testifying the values of southern society, as opposed to the evolution of the moral reflections of young Huckleberry on the situation of the black community in the soon preceding time to the American civil war.

Keywords: American Civil War, American Literature, Novel, Racism, Realism.

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In Mark Twain’s *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884), we are driven through the eyes of the protagonist, Huckleberry Finn in his escape down the Mississippi River. This novel is the successor of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876), both outstanding for being the narrative that portrays a childhood in the pre-war Mississippi Valley. Despite his initial announcements of a lack of purpose, the author intended to get away from the romantic visions of his period and show the reality of the American Southern life. But at the end of the novel, the reader will have discovered different life lessons. Although the novel is settled before the Civil War, the context of the writing belongs to the second half of the nineteenth century, during the era of the American Realism. Before Realism appeared in American literature, it was already flourishing in Europe, but it was the disillusionment following the Civil War what destroyed the romantic view of humanity, and leading many authors to the representation of life as it actually was, a never embellished everydayness reality. Mark Twain belonged to this first generation of Realist American writers. He explored American lives, and, as many other writers, his pragmatic treatment of ordinary citizens achieved the creation of memorable characters, heroes of their own period of time. This article aims to focus on the character of Huckleberry Finn as the major attainment of the novel through the choice of a Southern child to guide the novel, the points of view of said main character about the ideals and the morality lessons related with slavery learned in his journey.

Firstly, we must focus on the presentation of the protagonist and the development of his identity. Huckleberry Finn is a thirteen-year-old child who narrates his escape from the repression of his drunken father and tutor, roving through the Mississippi accompanied by a black slave, Jim. The genre of the novel could be catalogued as a fictional autobiography, a book of adventures (or even a travel book). But, the fact of being depicted as a roguish teenager, and the episodic and satirical nature, identify it more with the picaresque novel. However, the representation and evolution of the main

character have more value than the adventures they suffer. The fact that he is the narrator, accentuate his importance within the novel, since everything will revolve around him, and there is no more reality than his own. As F. Scott Fitzgerald coined: 'He was the first to look back at the Republic from the perspective of the West. His eyes were the first eyes that ever looked at us objectively that were not eyes from overseas'¹, meaning that Huckleberry is an ordinary child who acts as a mirror of the regional customs of 19th-century American people. For that, and one of the main attractions of the novel, Mark Twain succeed in portraying the dialect speech of the characters. From the very beginning of the novel, Huckleberry makes use of many idioms, for example: 'But it warn't no time to be sentimentering'², it seems there are many grammatical mistakes, but what the author seeks is to achieve a reading similar to the local speech. Even more, the author anticipates at the beginning of the novel, in the Explanatory: 'The shadings have not been done in a haphazard fashion, or by guesswork; but painstakingly, and with the trustworthy guidance and support of personal familiarity with these several forms of speech'³, that is his explanation of the reason why there are many words written as phonetic transcriptions. He wanted to portray accurately the language of the characters, as an essential part of a time period and culture. Furthermore, as Mary Jane Hurst declares, in reference to Janet McKay: 'Huck's style of casually addressing the reader includes many features of direct discourse'⁴ in reference to the times in which the protagonist takes the role of writer, talking to the reader as in 'You don't know about me'⁵, and creates an extra-linguistic door where the character maintains a conversation with the reader itself. These are many of the stylistic reasons, why we can say that the election of the protagonist is essential for the credibility of the work, readers will only be participants of what he choose to share and any event will be worthless without him.

Secondly, through the eyes of the main character, the author recreates a realistic and objective perspective of the pre-bellum society. We must not forget that this novel was written after the civil war, and somehow I the main character is influenced by the thinking of the author, because, despite its crystalline writing, Huckleberry is as a time traveller who represents the new generation of American thought. A possible reason why Mark Twain chose a child to direct the course of his work, was due to his innocence. Despite his education, he is not influenced by the values that have been instilled to him and, since he has not the same life experience as adults, he has to create his own, learning from his mistakes and discovering the world from his raft. However, thanks to his memoirs, it remains different objective perspectives of American history. On the one hand, we have to differentiate his conception of religion and beliefs. To understand the religious conception of the time, we can take as an example the testimony of the theologian Robert Lewis Dabney who declared: 'We know that on the Bible argument the abolition party will be driven to unveil their true infidel tendencies. The Bible being bound to stand on our side, they have to come out and array themselves against the Bible.'⁶ The society of the time often used the Bible to defend a political idea or another, but Huckleberry Finn does not consider it as a political force, but as a force of destiny. Even though he is not a practising Christian, he never denies the existence of God: 'And at last, when it hit me all of a sudden that here was the plain hand of Providence slapping me in the face and letting me know my wickedness was being watched all the time from up there in heaven'⁷ as we can see in this passage after the capture of Jim, he believes that God only helps those who really follow his rules and punishes those who disobey them. When he run away and starts his journey with Jim, he become his new tutor, and, therefore, he will also be influenced by his beliefs. Jim has a culture which is well aware of the fate, curses and signs of destiny. 'I had heard about some of these things before, but not all of them. Jim knowed all kinds of signs. [...] I said it looked to me like all the signs was about bad luck, and so I asked him if there warn't any good-luck signs'⁸ Huckleberry is also respectful with other cultures beliefs, he does

¹ H. Bloom, *Mark Twain*. (Philadelphia: Chelsea House, 2003), p. 59.

² M. Twain, *Mark Twain*. (London: Shoes and Ships and Sealing Wax, 2008), p. 93.

³ *Ibid.* p. 72.

⁴ M. Hurst, *The voice of the child in American literature*. (Lexington, Ky.: University Press of Kentucky, 1990). p. 103.

⁵ M. Twain, *Mark Twain*. (London: Shoes and Ships and Sealing Wax, 2008), p. 72.

⁶ G. Rhea, 'Why Non-Slaveholding Southerners Fought', *Civilwar.org* (2011), <http://www.civilwar.org/education/history/civil-war-overview/why-non-slaveholding.html?referrer=https://www.google.es/> [Accessed 3 Jan. 2016].

⁷ M. Twain, *Mark Twain*. (London: Shoes and Ships and Sealing Wax, 2008), p. 137

⁸ *Ibid.* p. 85.

not deny the possibility that their destiny is manipulated by supernatural forces. Though these ideological perspectives evolve when he encounters other characters as the king and the duke: 'If they warn't the beatenest lot, them two frauds, that ever I struck [...] It was enough to make a body ashamed of the human race'⁹, they represented a show whose only purpose was to cheat the villagers and run away. But eventually they are caught: 'I knowed it WAS the king and the duke, though they was all over tar and feathers, and didn't look like nothing in the world that was human—just looked like a couple of monstrous big soldier-plumes.'¹⁰ Not because of the grace of God, but by the villagers who capture them and subject them to the justice they deserve. The fact that the protagonist feels sorry for these two, is because he considers that the punishment is greater than the crime, and also because even himself reinvents his identity numerous times, but his purpose is quite different, as he only pretend to gain the freedom he craved, hiding himself of the identity himself killed. But, as the rest of them, he was also discovered at the end of the novel: 'So Tom's Aunt Polly, she told all about who I was, and what; and I had to up and tell how I was in such a tight place that when Mrs. Phelps took me for Tom Sawyer'¹¹. Thereby, through his different perspectives about justice and beliefs, Huckleberry discover us that any force of nature changes the fate of each individual but their actions. And, although religion is so important, believers are not merciful. However, the hypocrisy of humanity ends at one of the biggest attacks on human beings of that period: slavery.

Closely tied to the concept of destiny, we must point out how the perspectives of the protagonist are in fact reflexions of how different can fate be depending on the race of man. The slave community in the southern states was more than remarkable, as the historian Robert N. Rosen reported: 'by the late 1850's [...] most white Southerners viewed themselves as prisoners in their own country, condemned by what they saw as a hysterical abolition movement.'¹² This was one of the Southerners reasons about favouring slavery. They considered themselves owners of America, so they decided to enslave these communities, not to be invaded as they outnumber them. The protagonist suffers in the first instance slavery, not because his skin colour, but with his education and custody. At first, seems to resist the education Widow Douglas provides him: 'At first I hated the school, but by and by I got so I could stand it. [...] So the longer I went to school the easier it got to be. I was getting sort of used to the widow's ways, too, and they warn't so raspy on me'¹³. But the widow's intentions are truncated with the appearance of his father, who gives him a treatment completely opposite to hers: 'He said he'd cowhide me till I was black and blue if I didn't raise some money for him'¹⁴ Huckleberry was severely mistreated, so he had to develop a plan to flee. His desires to abandon his house had a happy outcome because, when he got his freedom was when he really felt like home, although it was on a raft: 'We said there warn't no home like a raft, after all. Other places do seem so cramped up and smothery [...] You feel mighty free and easy and comfortable on a raft'¹⁵ But this identification of freedom and home would not have been possible without the occurrence of one of the main characters, the slave Jim. At the beginning, despite being also fugitive, and because of the local influence, Huckleberry treats Jim dismissively, but in spite of this, he retracts his mistake: 'It was fifteen minutes before I could work myself up to go and humble myself to a nigger; but I done it, and I warn't ever sorry for it afterwards, neither. I didn't do him no more mean tricks, and I wouldn't done that one if I'd a knowed it would make him feel that way'.¹⁶ The mockery and all the feeling of superiority just disappears when he starts seeing Jim as a father figure. The evolution of the relationship is more than clear, even the last of the adventures of Huck is nothing more than giving freedom to the slave. In addition, Huckleberry highlights the unfair treatment of all the villagers, through the pursuit and capture of black slaves, with servants who obey them always respectfully. 'I'd see him standing my watch on top of his'n, 'stead of calling me, so I could go on sleeping; [...] and would always call me honey, and pet me and do everything he could think of for me, and how good he always was'¹⁷.

⁹ M. Twain, *Mark Twain*. (London: Shoes and Ships and Sealing Wax, 2008), p. 121.

¹⁰ Ibid. p. 143.

¹¹ Ibid. p. 162.

¹² R. Rosen, *Confederate Charleston*. (Columbia, S.C: University of South Carolina Press, 1994), p.23.

¹³ M. Twain, *Mark Twain*. (London: Shoes and Ships and Sealing Wax, 2008), p. 76.

¹⁴ Ibid. p. 78.

¹⁵ Ibid. p. 107

¹⁶ Ibid. p. 98.

¹⁷ Ibid. p. 138.

That is when the voice of the narrator make the readers think about human nature. How, even we are all human beings, not all individuals have the same freedom. And even goes further when dealing with the issue of human cruelty. For that, after he receives the news that the King and Duke have been punished with a cruel humiliation, he concludes that justice never comes to be applied fairly, resulting in one of the most important insights about human consciousness: 'it don't make no difference whether you do right or wrong, a person's conscience ain't got no sense, and just goes for him anyway'¹⁸ To the protagonist, the world is mostly corrupted. Those who have the privilege of being born free, and therefore hold the power over the world, use justice with the minimum pretext to harm others. And the discriminated communities does not even have the possibility to speak out against such violence and evil. Thus, thanks to the thoughts and dialogues that the protagonist maintains, and, although the author declared that the novel had no moral learning, we can find in it important lessons about humanity.

In summary, the successful realistic writing of Mark Twain has been able to create an iconic character of world literature. Without the existence of Huckleberry, the book would be meaningless, it would be another historical book about the Southern life. The innocent voice of the protagonist dismantles the society of the time, denounces the identification of politics and religion, the treatment of human beings as objects and the socially accepted human inhumanity. Huckleberry's voice endure, over time, the universal teachings about the equality and freedom of men that even nowadays seem being forgotten.

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¹⁸ M. Twain, *Mark Twain*. (London: Shoes and Ships and Sealing Wax, 2008), p. 143.