

Unusual Narrators: Huck Finn's Vision of the United States of America

Autor: García Blázquez, Carolina (Licenciada en Filología Inglesa y en Filología Hispánica, Profesora de Inglés en Escuela Oficial de Idiomas).

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Abstract

The narrator is often a key element when it comes to the development of a literary work and this is precisely the case of Huckleberry Finn in Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. This article shows how the author depicts the society of the Southern States in the US at the time of slavery and how he criticises it through the words of a child. Otherwise, he could not have been so severe against the social conventions and prejudice of that period.

Keywords: Huckleberry Finn, Mark Twain, narrator, prejudice, education

Título: Narradores diferentes: La visión de Estados Unidos de Huck Finn.

Resumen

A menudo el narrador constituye un elemento clave en el desarrollo de una obra literaria y ese es precisamente el caso de Huckleberry Finn en la novela de Twain *Las Aventuras de Huckleberry Finn*. Este artículo pone de manifiesto la forma en que el autor retrata la sociedad de los estados del Sur de Estados Unidos en los tiempos de la esclavitud y cómo lleva a cabo una crítica de la misma a través de las palabras de un niño. No hubiera de otra forma podido emitir un juicio tan severo contra las convenciones sociales y prejuicios de la época.

Palabras clave: Huckleberry Finn, Mark Twain, narrador, prejuicio, educación.

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INTRODUCTION

The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, by Mark Twain, was published in 1885, two decades after the end of the American Civil War (1861-1865), which brought the States of the North and the States of the South into conflict. This period in which Mark Twain gave birth to his most popular works is known as the Gilded Age –a term based on a novel by Twain himself in collaboration with Charles Dudley Warner– and is famous for being economically glorious but poor in literary terms. Nevertheless, Mark Twain became a very well-known author and acquired a great success by means of the introduction of many novelties in his works. He sold his books by subscription, which allowed him to become wealthier than most of his colleagues. Moreover, Twain was the first North American author to introduce a first person narrator having the voice of a child in a book for adults. This he did in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, where Twain portrayed the society of the age and the prejudice that the population had against black slaves through the words of a boy. This novel, which is, in appearance, children's literature –taking into account Twain's previous works such as *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* but, specially, the childish character of the protagonist and narrator in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*– proves to have many adult implications in a similar way to Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* and Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, as both also seem to be adventure books for children, but actually contain sharp criticism to the human race and strong Puritan beliefs, respectively.

Twain gave birth to 'Local Colour Realism', which consisted in mimetically reflecting how North America looked like always focusing on specific areas, in his case, the South and its mingling of races. Twain, through Huck, the narrator, observed his society and, in accordance with the actions of its inhabitants, made the young boy give several evidence which were supposed to lead readers to a conclusion.

This article aims to show how Huckleberry Finn breaks with all the conventions of behaviour towards slaves when enrolling in a journey with an African American named Jim, with whom he shares many characteristics. Mark Twain, who was “radically against injustice and imperialism” (Twain, 1994 [1885]: 2), proves the absurdity of the prejudices and

conventions established, especially focusing on the educational aspect, by showing the relationship –whether father-son or mere friends– which emerges between Huck and Jim, who belong to different races and statuses.

The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn is a story on freedom having “the formula of the *American Dream*” as a frame, since the author makes the readers continually bear in mind the ideas of liberty, respect and equality as Coy quotes from the U.S. Constitution: “Todos los hombres son creados iguales... y gozan de los mismos derechos inalienables, entre los que están la vida, la libertad y la búsqueda de la felicidad” (Coy, 2004: 337).

The historical context is essential to understand Huck's description of the society at that time. Economy made the American Civil War break out, for the states of the North based their wealth on industry while the Southern states had an economic system sustained by agriculture, which at the same time obtained its major gains from the exploitation of slaves. The Northern states wanted to put an end to the slavery in the South, since it was one of the major problems in the country. Slavery, however, did not come to an end with the victory of the Northern states in 1865, 'the Peculiar Institution' persisting in the Southern states for years.

THE NARRATOR

In *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* we find Huck living in the Southern state of Missouri some years before the war takes place and, so, he is surrounded by slavery. Throughout the novel the boy expresses what he sees and feels, what he is taught and what he believes in. Huck narrates his story in the past while his friend Tom is recovering from a shot he received when trying to help Jim, a slave, escape. Then, the boy looks back on how he has changed during the time he has spent with Jim in the same way that the general attitude towards Negroes will change in the near future.

As mentioned above, in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Mark Twain makes use of a first person narrator who is not other than the protagonist, Huck Finn, a thirteen-year-old boy wanting to escape from civilisation, that is, social conventions. Huckleberry Finn is at the same time the narrator and the protagonist of his adventures; hence, he tells his own story, with an obvious biased perspective, which is not the same as having it told by a third person narrator even if s/he is an omniscient one. It is clear, then, that when somebody else narrates one's story s/he tends to omit certain details highlighting some others in a different way to that one would do himself/herself.

The fact that this character tells a specific passage of the story of his life allows Twain to state certain things he would not dare say through the voice of an adult. Huck is supposedly an innocent boy and it is precisely through this innocence that we get to see the prejudices of society: “Es precisamente la mirada amoral e inocente de Huck, con una percepción radicalmente distinta de la del individuo socializado, la que nos hace ver las absurdas convenciones de la sociedad” (Gurpegui, 2001: 145). For this reason, many issues in the novel were forgiven at the age starting from the very fact that Huck becomes friends with a Negro, let alone the fact that he helps him escape, since “Huck and Jim, white boy and black man, free man and slave, youth and age—their mutual pact strikes at the very heart of the ancestral myths of prohibited behaviour in a slave-holding Southern culture” (Lee, 1984: 34 & 35).

Huck Finn is in the limit between the Whites and the uncivilised savages, since he does not fit the common image of “a White”. Huck is uneducated, he dislikes cleanliness, has smoking habits and spends the whole day mucking about bare-footed. These characteristics help him understand Jim a bit more, since Huck and Jim share many aspects. Both can be associated to the concept of 'otherness': Huck for being uncivilised and totally against receiving a religious education and Jim, specially, for his different race in connection to the 'common whiteness'. Moreover, the two characters can be seen as a representation of the negative according to the theory of binary thought, which establishes that Western culture is based on binary oppositions. In every pair of opposites one term is associated to the positive, the 'common' and the 'normal' while the other is related to the negative. This is the case of Huck and Jim who, in opposition to the civilisation, education and religion of the Whites, are depicted as uncivilised, savage and superstitious. These terms (uncivilised, savage and superstitious) are linked to education and knowledge, specifically to the lack of them; however, we will see how Huck and, especially, Jim have loads of folkloric knowledge, which is as valid as an imposed religious one.

EDUCATION AS A THEME

Huck describes the 'educational episodes' as unbearable. He does not understand why he is forced to behave in a certain way and such is the pressure and the insistence that Huck's tutors practice on him that the boy truly wishes to leave and be free living the way he likes out of civilisation. The fact that Huck despises the education Miss Watson and

widow Douglas want to imprint on him is obvious. Still, even at the very end of the novel the adolescent reassures his rejection against civilisation: “Aunt Sally she's going to adopt me and sivilize me and I can't stand it. I been there before” (Twain, 1994 [1885]: 281).

Miss Watson and widow Douglas try to give Huck a 'proper' education in terms of eating habits, cleanliness and good behaviour, but they mostly want him to be a 'good Christian':

'La viuda Douglas [...] pretende “civilizarlo”, es decir, hacerle comer a sus horas no cuando Huck tiene hambre; [...] le obliga a llevar zapatos e ir bien aseado; [...] le prohíbe el “sucio” vicio de fumar su pipa de maíz; [...] le hace asistir a la escuela dominical para que se convierta en un “buen cristiano”.' (Coy, 2004: 337)

Miss Watson urges Huck to pray “every day” so that “whatever” he asks for he gets (Twain, 1994 [1885]: 20) and severely tells him off when she finds out that Huck is superstitious, superstition having for long been considered as a heresy: “One morning I happened to turn over the salt-cellar at breakfast. I reached for some of it as quick as I could to throw over my left shoulder and keep off the bad luck, but Miss Watson was in ahead of me, and crossed me off” (Twain, 1994 [1885]: 24).

Huck believes in the salt myth which, by the way, has persisted to our day, and which assures that spilling salt brings bad luck; nonetheless, throwing some of the spilt salt over one's shoulder dissipates the curse. But this is not the only legend that the boy believes in, since he receives very negative vibrations when seeing a spider being burnt, for spiders were supposed to be immortal:

“Pretty soon a spider went crawling up my shoulder, and I flipped it off and it lit in the candle; and before I could budge it was all shrivelled up. I didn't need anybody to tell me that that was an awful bad sign and would fetch me some bad luck.” (Twain, 1994 [1885]: 13)

This episode, together with Huck's thought of his father not being dead (“I knowed [...] that a drowned man don't float on his back, but on his face. So I knowed, then, that this warn't pap” (Twain, 1994 [1885]: 21)), led him to consult someone who has a wider knowledge on magic and superstition and this was Miss Watson's slave, Jim.

Black slaves were supposed not to have any kind of knowledge, since they received no formal education as such. However, Jim proves to be extremely wise in terms of folkloric knowledge as, for instance, he assures Huck that good luck will derive from the high tide and actually this good luck is realised into a raft which allows the boy to escape from the hands of his cruel father. Other examples are given once Huck and Jim enrol in their 'escape' journey, for the Negro has a bad omen in relation to a snakeskin and, indeed, Jim loses his opportunity to be set free when floating by Cairo as well as soon afterwards a steamboat crashes the fugitives' raft. Jim is never mistaken in his premonitions.

This 'escape' journey mentioned is in fact the centre of the action in the novel. Both characters undertake it separately when looking for freedom and occasionally meet and start travelling together. Huck, having pretended to be dead, is trying to escape from his father's brutality while Jim is looking for freedom, since he is a slave having heard of his mistress' plans of selling him: “I hear[d] ole missus tell the widder she gwyne to sell me down to Orleans, but she didn't want to, but she could git eight hund'd dollars for me, en it 'uz sich a big stack o'money she couldn' resis'” (Twain, 1994 [1885]: 50). Notice how naturally secondary characters speak about buying and selling people. Indeed, it is precisely because they do not consider black slaves to be worthy and rightful 'people' that they are not able to resist to large amounts of money.

In the words of Lee, “in allying himself with Jim, [Huck] allies himself against «manners»—«civilisation»—and against the Bible” (Lee, 1984: 38) showing, one more time, that he despises all these conventions and that he prefers to be wild. Withal, he is still influenced by some adult figures, a fact that justifies the attitude the boy has towards Jim at the beginning.

All in all, the black slave enriches the boy with much more of this superstition world of which he is fond. This allows one of the major prejudices on Negroes, that of their lack of knowledge, to be uncovered. However, there are some other

prejudices in the novel which are more deeply rooted and, undoubtedly, more cruel and which we get to see through secondary characters.

OTHER PREJUDICES PRESENT IN THE NOVEL

First of all, Huck's father is so convinced of the Whites' superiority that he is absolutely disrespectful towards Negroes. Huck presents him as a careless drunkard, a selfish person who has never loved his son but for the money Huck has saved from the treasures stolen together with his friend Tom Sawyer, this money being the only thing Huck's father is interested in. According to Lee, "Pap fulfils to perfection the image of the white-trash, nigger-hating, redneck rural Southerner, who clings to his notional superiority over black people as evident compensation for his own exploded self-respect" (Lee, 1984: 32). Blindly believing in the inferiority of the Blacks and, consequently, in them not deserving to have any rights, he feels deeply offended when he sees a Negro voting:

They said he could *vote*, when he was at home. Well, that let me out. Thinks I, what is the country a-coming to? It was 'lection day, and I was just about to go and vote, myself, if I warn't too drunk to get there; but when they told me there was a State in this country where they'd let that nigger vote, I drawed out. I says I'll never vote agin. (Twain, 1994 [1885]: 35)

These words of Pap are completely intolerant and demonstrate how unyielding people could be at that age, their minds being closed to any little change. Nonetheless, there are much more serious and terrifying comments such as this by Aunt Sally in reference to a boat which was blown up on the river:

'Good gracious! Anybody hurt?'

'No'm. Killed a nigger.'

'Well, it's lucky; because sometimes people do get hurt'. (Twain, 1994 [1885]: 215)

Aunt Sally's comment is unacceptable nowadays; however, in the 19th century's Southern states, nobody seemed to be shocked at a statement such as this, which clearly demeans the Blacks to the category of animals. The fact that Negroes are not considered to be human beings leads us again to the binary thought theory, since the Blacks are presented as savage and uncivilised things –not even beings– on the verge of the negative in the dichotomies good/bad, civilised/uncivilised, educated/savage. Moreover, these claims are totally against the aforementioned words of the Founding Fathers assuring that all of us are equal and have some rights to be preserved, these being life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. In addition, the fact that they are seen as mere objects allows people at that age to turn them into "expendable forms of capitalist commodity" (Lee, 1884: 32 & 33), selling them as goods or products –as Miss Watson is to do–.

Just having read of these two examples one can understand why Huck, who has been brought up in such a context, has an inner conflict in terms of helping a black slave escape. In fact, this inner conflict of the child is the key to that criticism Twain makes through the story: "El hecho de que un muchacho como Huck, con un corazón inocente, tiene [sic] una crisis moral por ayudar a un esclavo a escapar, constituye la denuncia más vigorosa de la sociedad en la que está inmerso" (Gurpegui, 2001: 147).

Huck gives rise to a "moral structure" (Gurpegui, 2001: 148) which develops from the inherited prejudices to the boy's change towards Jim's figure, who can be considered as a representation of the Black community. In this way, at the beginning Huck makes some pejorative comments –he, as a child, not being conscious of their implications– like the one stated when Jim gives up his freedom to help the shot Tom. Huck says of Jim: "I knowed he was white inside" (Twain, 1994 [1885]: 265) meaning "I knew he was good and caring inside" as if being black was opposite to being kind –obviously, this is the notion he had been taught–. In the same way, when referring to an impersonation crime the young boy exclaims: "Well, if ever I struck anything like it, I'm a nigger. It was enough to make a body ashamed of the human race" (Twain, 1994 [1885]: 161) and at a certain stage he recognises that Jim "had an uncommon level head, for a nigger" (Twain, 1994 [1885]: 81), which again shows that Huck was a product of his society, since he very well knew that Jim was tremendously

wise and that a Negro –in this case Jim, for he is the one Huck knows– could undertake many adventures which would fill humankind with pride.

This moral structure develops while the journey advances: “El viaje por el río coincidiría con el viaje al yo interior” (Gurpegui, 1984: 148). Huck, being far from his familiar atmosphere, has to confront many moral dilemmas in relation to Jim but, eventually, he allows a strong comradeship to be established between them. Huck Finn realises that this relationship he has with Jim would be unsustainable at shore and, so, the river becomes a place of salvation where security and freedom can be preserved in opposition to the violence and corruption present at shore. Then, like in a children's game, Huck and Jim continually try to get to the safety of the 'home' before their enemy captures them.

Huck is deeply worried about “the damage to his reputation in having aided a slave escape” (Lee, 1984: 38):

And then think of me! It would get all around that Huck Finn helped a nigger to get his freedom; and if I was to ever see anybody from that town again, I'd be ready to get down and lick his boots for shame. [...] Something inside of me kept saying, 'There was the Sunday-school, you could a gone to it; and if you'd a done it they'd a learnt you, there, that people that acts as I'd been acting about that nigger goes to everlasting fire'. (Twain, 1994 [1885]: 206 and 207)

It is obvious that the situation was very difficult for such a young boy, since conventions were so widespread and categorical that the child was horrified by the fact that he truly had to get on his knees and lick the others' shoes for his behaviour as if he was a detestable creature. By having to do so Huck would be degraded to the same level of the Negroes, who were continually mistreated. Then, one can say that when helping a Black one turned into a Black. Notwithstanding, the worst of it all was the support given by the Church –the Sunday-school– to this racist conduct, for, as referred to in the quotation above, anyone aiming a Negro was to burn in hell. This, obviously, goes against any code of behaviour towards one's neighbour preached in any religion.

In addition, Christianity is supposed to be based on forgiveness. Even so, we notice how hard it is for Huck to beg for Jim's pardon since nobody was supposed to humiliate before a Negro, since black people were considered inferior, were disrespected as human beings and were supposed to have no rights:

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. (Twain, 1994 [1885]: 90)

Notice the contradiction between the Christian moral values that Miss Watson and widow Douglas want to transfer to the child –which are supposed to be those spread among the whole community– and the actual attitude towards Negroes displayed by all members of society. Their own actions and thoughts are totally against any religious and moral behaviour.

However, Huck's final words allow and allowed the readers to reflect on the condition of the Blacks, for they obviously are and were human beings with feelings and emotions just as the Whites. The fact that the boy never repents of his begging for pardon speaks volumes on Huck's character as well as gives a clear example of the change of attitude towards Negroes which was needed and which, with the passing of time, eventually took place.

CONCLUSIONS

Withal, the essential in the novel is to see how Huck, in the end, is ready to go to hell for Jim. According to Frantz “this present[s] the continual conflict in the boy's mind between his love for Jim and the teachings of his society and thus indicate[s] something of his values as they spring from his reason and his heart” (Frantz, 1956: 326). Hence, Huck is a transgressor, a precursor of the times to come and shows how he obviates every convention surrounding him just being guided by his good-natured heart.

Huck the narrator, in spite of all the things he teaches the readers, being a self-conscious narrator claims that he would and will never write a book again due to its difficulty, which actually never happened, since Twain did not give him the opportunity: "...and so there ain't nothing more to write about, and I am rotten glad of it, because if I'd knowed what a trouble it was to make a book I wouldn't a tackled it and ain't agoing to no more" (Twain, 1994 [1885]: 281).

In conclusion, the vision that Huck gives of the United States of America makes people aware of the real attitude and behaviour of, at least, part of a nation. Huckleberry Finn gives a wide account of the existence of slavery in his time telling us some details that an adult would not see or would on purpose hide. The novel clearly proves that African Americans had a wider knowledge than that they were supposed to have and that this and other prejudices against them such as their inferiority, the absence of need of their rights to be respected, the impossibility of intercultural relationships to take place, etc. were soon to disappear, since the innocence of children was to surpass all this mistreatment and newer generations were to radically rebel against the slaves' living conditions as once the Northern states did.

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