
Adventures of Huckleberry Finn:
Looking for “America”



Maria Teresa Castilho | Universidade do Porto

Adventures of Huckleberry Finn is one of the books in late nineteenth century American Literary History that best fictionalizes a particular ambivalence in American thought and culture. On the one hand, from its beginning and throughout its history, America is linked to a particular utopian impulse and to a resulting utopianism which have informed different American cultural forms. But on the other hand, an anxiety installed by a dystopian feeling brought by the awareness of the impossibility of the existence of a good life in a better (American) society has also dominated American convictions and thought. What I want to explore here is both how this ambivalence, which is so frequent, so intense and so particular in American thought and culture, emerges in Twain’s book and how curiously it simultaneously reaffirms American utopianism at the end of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.

The voyage (such an identifiable American theme) down the Mississippi river has been the starting point for the majority of the canonical reflections on *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Leo Marx, for example, considered in 1953 that any position on the book will have to start by questioning the meaning of that voyage down the Mississippi river (Marx, 1953: 429). Bruce King, on the other hand, defended in 1974 that the importance of the voyage should not be taken merely in structural terms but that it should be seen as the Americanization of the traditional allegory, present in European literature, of the soul’s pilgrimage around the world, oriented in a new direction (King, 1974: 110): a voyage that withdraws Huck from Miss Watson’s society onto the raft, the “good place”, where “a community of saints”, in Trilling’s words (Trilling, 1979: 104), is overshadowed by the

presence of the King and the Duke, both marked with the hypocrisy and the cruelty of the South in a new continent in search of a utopia. This is a journey that takes Huck away from what is established, what is cruel, from Miss Watson's civilization, from everything which represses him, towards the unknown, towards an uncivilized pastoral world: a running away from everything which Pap Finn represents in order to go in search of a new world of freedom. In this way, in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* the reader is left before the (re)interpretation of a well-known element – the journey – with a new meaning – looking for an idyllic place, a new Eden. But this is also a journey that does not end with the simple movement from one world to another, but rather which continues within a new statute achieved by Huck. And a very particular process of learning takes place within this continual movement guided by the river, which seems to flow for ever with the pressing need to go further, imposed by some episodes, as happens on Jackson Island, for example.

As the raft floats down the river, Huck, Twain's narrator, undergoes an experience which leads him into learning about and understanding reality, which to his eyes appears to be cruel and dystopian. All this inevitably leads Huck to turn his back on his conscience (de)formed by society in order to embrace his own natural one.

Tearing up the letter that would return Jim to Miss Watson and the decision to go to hell constitutes the climax and, at the same time, the resolution of a conflict between two moral consciences. This conflict dominates Huck from the moment (in chapter XVI) he becomes aware that he is helping a Negro to escape from slavery, which was a sin according to the moral and the religious view imposed by his education in Miss Watson's house. Until that moment of awareness, Huck had identified his escape with Jim's, and that is why he told him: "Git ups and hump yourself Jim! There ain't a minute to lose. They're after us" (Bradley, 1977: 54). In fact, as Leo Marx points out, nobody will come to the island in search of Huck, since, apart from Jim, nobody knows he is alive. Even so he uses the first person plural (Marx, 1988: 430). In effect, it is from now on that the feelings of friendship and solidarity emerge and develop in Huck's natural inner self. These feelings frequently dominate his own conscience which he begins to hear and which opposes the conscience he had acquired through his "education" in society, and which he ends up rejecting. It is this former conscience, influenced by individual values, which is so different from the one he is still attached to, that Jim troubles without knowing it:

Pooty soon I'll be a shoun't for joy, en Ill say, it's all on accounts o' Huck; I's a free man, en I couldn't ever been free ef it hadn't ben for Huck; Huck done it. Jim won't ever forgit you, Huck: you's de bes' fren' Jim's ever had; en you's de only fren' ole Jim's got now. (Bradley, 1977: 74)

This conflict between two consciences gets stronger when Jim points out the value of friendship. Huck has to face a moral dilemma because he feels bad when he realizes Jim considers him his only friend, since he knows that if he behaves "right", according to society's values, he cannot keep on helping the slave. And to develop this theme of deep friendship which connects people, Mark Twain makes a significant choice in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* since the story develops itself in an America which denied black people any rights or even feelings. On the other hand, Twain's choice is so much more significant that America considered it a crime to help a fleeing slave. However, in the book the raft is the place where Huck and Jim live in intimacy in an idyllic community, separated and freed from the world, living in harmony with nature. Here on the raft, racial prejudices disappear and Huck and Jim are transformed into just two human beings.

As the Mississippi flows, on the raft, Huck and Jim are no longer part of civilization or of a society which does not accept the pure feelings which unite them both. Ultimately there is no place for Miss Watson's views on slavery or for Tom's world of fantasies. The raft seems indeed to purify those who can be redeemed, and that is why the King and the Duke will never be part of that ideal community Huck and Jim belong to:

They went off, and I got aboard the raft, feeling bad and low, because I knowed very well I had done wrong, and I see it warn't no use for me to try to learn to do right; a body that don't get started right when he's little, ain't got no show – when the pinch comes there ain't nothing to back him up and keep him to his work, and so he gets beat. Then I thought a minute, and says to myself, hold on, – s'pose you'd a done right and give Jim up; would you felt better than what you do now? No, says I, I'd fell bad – I'd feel just the same way I do now. Well, then says I, what's the use you learning to do right, when it's troublesome to do right and ain't no trouble to do wrong, and the wages is just the same? I was stuck. I couldn't answer that. So I reckoned I wouldn't bother no more about it, but after this always do whichever come handiest at the time. (Bradley, 1977: 76)

Here lies the irony of the situation. On the raft, Huck behaves "right" (according to his conscience) when he is "wrong" (according to society's values). And this will be the case until Huck's return to life on Phelps farm. There, the conflict of the two moral consciences is reignited, and Tom, the southern middle-class boy, begins to take over Huck's individual inner values again. But the purifying effects of the raft are not felt by the King and the Duke,

who were born and bred in the heart of a society dominated by violence, racial inequality, hypocrisy and lies. Ultimately, they are the society itself, and so they cannot get away from it. These two tricksters, episodes such as the fight between the Grangerfords and the Shepherdsons, the discovery of the similarity between what is taught at the Sunday school and the world of Tom's fantasies, Boggs' murder, the cruelty of the people towards the lynching, in short, life on the banks of the river, all of this is part of Huck's experience. And it is this experience that increases Huck's own knowledge of selfishness, of evil, of human cowardice in a society in which everyone has a role to play. As Richard Gray points out with regard to *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, within society "everyone behaves like an actor, who has certain lines to say, clothes to wear, things to do, rather than as an independent individual" (Gray, 2004: 254).

Huck's whole experience, which is so vital to his (re)education, is guided by a kind of God, by a force which dominates him. The river is indeed like a God which influences and purifies Huck, guiding his learning experience. As a mythological element linked to fertility, the river flows and accomplishes its mission to enrich those who entrust themselves to it and, in this way, it is on the river that Huck learns a natural justice, which would be impossible to learn within society. The Mississippi, and with it the raft, is presented as an ideal world, a utopia, which both Huck and Twain fall in love with. That is a world which cannot be thought or understood by the society and the culture young Tom comes from; it is a world that makes it possible for Huck and Jim to be nearly always naked, that is, free from the clothing society imposes. And thus they are innocent people in the Garden of Eden. The river and all that surrounds it is very often described as a magic world in opposition to the riverbanks, all of which makes Huck express how wonderful it is to live on a raft, as happens in the last words of chapter XVIII or in the beautiful description which opens chapter XIX:

It was a monstrous big river down there – sometimes a mile and a half wide; we run nights, and laid up and hid day-times; soon as night was most gone, we stopped navigating and tied up – nearly always in the dead water under a tow-head; and then cut young cottonwoods and willows and hid the raft with them. Then we set out the lines. Next we slid into the river and had a swim, so as to freshen up and cool off; then we set down on the sandy bottom where the water was about knee deep, and watched the daylight come. Not a sound, anywheres – perfectly still – just like the whole world was asleep, only sometimes the bull-frogs a-cluttering, maybe. (Bradley, 1977: 96)

The river is, however, also dangerous and leads to the unknown, to the unexpected, to the sandbanks, to the storms, to the fogs, because the “river god” – to use Lionel Trilling’s words – doesn’t only have a benevolent side. Indeed, the journey guided by the river also leads to moments of pessimism and disappointment, which undoubtedly contribute to Huck’s inner growth. But as the plot unfolds we are also led to question Twain’s own problematization, raised by an implied voice, about Huck’s innocent conclusions, up to his final decision “to light out for the Territory ahead of the rest” (*idem* 229).

It is clear that my reading of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* also underlines what for Leo Marx is unquestionable: “*Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is, among other things, the fulfillment of a powerful pastoral impulse” (Marx, 1988: 20). However, I also want to make clear that if *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is a book that looks nostalgically at a lost utopian pastoral America, which is definitely lost, on the other hand it is also, as Richard Gray very well states, a book “about a moment in American history when a sense of humanity and individuality was lost, with terrible consequences for the nation” (Gray, 2004: 255). And if we look deeper into the novel, we will also understand what Randal Knoper, in 1989, stated in “‘Away from Home and Amongst Strangers’: Domestic Sphere, Public Arena and *Huckleberry Finn*”: “Despite Mark Twain’s situating the story ‘four to fifty years ago’ and in a rural valley, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* closely engaged daily dilemmas and concerns of a Northern, urban, middle-class audience” (Knoper, 1989: 125). In fact, Huck’s final decision to go to the “Territory”, and thus stay on his journey and maintain an a-social condition to look for his utopian America, isn’t merely the celebration of that lost pastoral and Edenic past. I think that, as Randal Knoper states in his reading, “Mark Twain sets up his territory in this novel with topographical correspondence to the urban landscape, dividing it up in terms similar to the Northern middle class’s divisions of the city into the comforts of home and the public, the female and the male, sectors of truth and of dissimulation (*idem*, 138). But what happens with *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is after all what Richard Gray tells us about many American writers:

The nostalgic utopianism that characterizes so many American cultural forms has impelled numerous writers and artists to look back in longing, and to see some moment in the national history as the time the nation crossed the thresholds from innocence to experience. (Gray, 2004: 257)

Thus, my reading wants to underline that from this novel also emerge enthusiastic feelings on the turning point America was living in the later years of the nineteenth century, feelings which suggested hope towards the future. And that is definitely what Huck's final decision to go to the "Territory" symbolizes.

Indeed if, as the first readings of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* underline, in this novel Mark Twain undoubtedly offers the reader a nostalgic vision of an Edenic utopian America where a good pastoral life could be lived and the American Adam was a possibility; on the other hand, the writer ends the book announcing how futile that project was. However, and just because Twain's Territory sets up a topographical correspondence to the urban landscape, a spokesperson who no longer believes in an American Adam emerges at the end of the book. This spokesperson makes the reader also understand that, as Ruland and Bradbury very well state, "[Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*] is not just a story of nature but society, the society of mercantile, often urban central river where the great technological steamboats work, as do the Melvillean confidence men, the King and the Duke, exploiting innocence for gain" (Ruland / Bradbury, 1992: 199). And Huck's final decision reveals all the anxiety brought by his dystopian discoveries and consequent feelings.

However, Twain's hero does not give up his journey. On the contrary, Huck moves to the "Territory", which, when the novel was published, wasn't free land any more. With Huck's final decision, Twain also ends his novel bringing us an implied spokesperson who, being no longer an American Adam, seems, however, to announce that he will keep on anxiously looking for perfectibility. This spokesperson voices that, with Huck, he will keep on looking longingly for "America" in the future brought by the later half of the nineteenth century, when America was closer and closer to an urban and industrial society and culture.

Works Cited

- Bradley, Sculley et al. (eds.) (1977), Samuel Langhorne Clemens: *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, New York, W.W. Norton & Company [1961].
- Gray, Richard (2004), *A History of American Literature*, Oxford, Blackwell Publishers.
- King, Bruce (1974), "Huckleberry Finn", in Dean Morgan Schmitter (ed.), *Mark Twain: Collection of Criticism*, New York, McGraw-Hill, Inc.
- Knoper, Randall (1989), "'Away from Home and Amongst Strangers': Domestic Sphere, Public Arena and *Huckleberry Finn*", in *Prospects*, vol. 14, pp. 125-40.

- Marx, Leo (1953), "Samuel Clemens: *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*", in *The American Scholar*, vol. 22, n° 4 (Autumn 1953), pp. 329-423.
- _ _ (1988), *The Pilot and the Passenger: Essays on Literature, Technology and Culture in the United States*, New York, Oxford University Press.
- Ruland, Richard / Malcolm Bradbury (1992), *From Puritanism to Postmodernism: A History of American Literature*, Harmondsworth, Penguin Books Ltd.
- Trilling, Lionel (1979), *The Liberal Imagination: Essays on Literature and Society*, New York, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.