

**ASPECTS OF SEXUAL IDENTITY APPLIED TO
HUCKLEBERRY FINN: AN OVERVIEW**

Ricardo Maria dos Santos

UNESP – Araraquara/SP

Since its publication in 1885, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* has been subject to various sorts of praise and criticism; the acme of the former is still felt to be Ernest Hemingway's statement that "all modern American literature comes from one book by Mark Twain called *Huckleberry Finn*". (INGE, p. 350), while the latter has concentrated on three different problems which generations of critics judged to affect Twain's achievement in that novel: issues concerning the end of the narrative (the "interlude" chapters), questions about the treatment of race and racism in the novel, and aspects that broach matters of gender and sexuality. Although the first two controversial areas above are often intricately mixed and have produced a wealth of academic production as well as an ongoing social and educational discussion, the third aspect came last in the public arena, and this paper will attempt to highlight some of its most significant moments in the critical bibliography on *Huckleberry Finn*.

Huckleberry Finn was first – and often still is – assigned a place on the shelves of children's literature, especially where one could find "boys' books". This was particularly felt to be true at the time of its publication, when a common reason for disapproving the depiction of the child characters in the novel echoed the authorities' rising concern with adolescent delinquency and the problem of the "bad boy". As Gerald Graff voices it, in answer to charges of far-fetchedness in seeing issues of gender in the story,

“[t]o classify a text as a boy’s book is implicitly to underscore the issue of gender. If gender was not considered an issue by early readers who called the novel a boy’s book, this was only because the definition of what a boy is or should be was then assumed to be uncontroversial. (p. 480)

Many critics, using the theoretical framework of gender studies, have drawn attention to the notion that what is perceived as typical of boys or girls points to the ideological arbitrariness of concepts such as masculine and feminine, which are thus considered historical and social constructs, an observation which emphasizes the non-automatic – and sometimes mismatching – correspondence of the categories of gender and biological sex. In addition, the female characters in the novel play a rather secondary role, and, as Nancy Walker rightfully states, quite stereotypical ones. Although there may not have been any intention on its author’s part of dealing with such issues, these concerns are open to readers’ and critics’ analytical study, inasmuch as what we may discern as aspects implicitly or explicitly present in the literary work will depend to a large extent on the interpretive categories a given time and society enable its readers to identify.

Such is the case with some examples of feminist criticism dealing with that novel. Nancy Walker argues that *Huckleberry Finn*’s best examples of humanity are the relationships he forms – fleeting though they may be – with different female characters. While pointing out to the stereotype roles Miss Watson, Widow Douglas and Aunt Sally play in the text as paradigms of virtue and “reformers” of the male characters’ attitudes, Walker stresses the purpose Judith Lotus and Mary Jane Wilkins serve in the narrative. Judith Lotus comes into the novel, in chapter XI, when Huck had left Jackson Island in order to find information about what the townspeople were doing as to his and Jim’s whereabouts. As he is supposed to have been murdered, he decides to disguise as a girl and, when he knocks at the door of the first house he comes to in the village, he is lucky enough – or so he thinks – that the lady there is a

newcomer who could not recognise him. She gives him the precious information that she herself saw smoke coming from the island and inferred that the runaway slave is to be found there, and, acting on it, her husband is going to try to seize him that very night so as to lay hands in the reward put on Jim's capture. After this, she asks Huck to thread a needle, throw a lump at a rat and catch another lump in his lap. Immediately after this she takes his mask off, saying that Huck "[did] a girl tolerably poor" (p. 80), but sympathises with him and offers help, thinking he is a runaway apprentice. In this episode, Walker claims, Judith shows intelligence and kindness by seeing through his disguise and highlighting the different signs by which male and female behaviour would be performed quite distinctly in that socio-historical context.

The episode which features Mary Jane Wilkins comprises chapters XXIV up to XXX, and show the conmen King and Duke's strategies to rob the Wilkins orphans of their legitimate will by pretending the King was their father's long estranged brother who had come to town too late to see him alive. By showing a very dignified honesty and frankness as well as a deep trust in those scoundrels' stories, she makes Huck feel the pangs of consciousness when he sees how she and her sisters are about to be cheated, so much so that he decides to act on it, catching and hiding the money which Mary Jane had asked the conmen to keep safe, and exposing their fraudulent scheme. Walker says that the essential humanist and decent examples are set by these female characters, which would waken Huck Finn's moral awareness and would prepare him for his ultimate act of self-sacrifice, when he prefers to "go to hell" instead of handing Jim to Miss Watson and the authorities.

Another example of feminist criticism is provided by Myra Jehlen's article for the book "Critical Terms for Literary Study" and which applies part of its analytical tools on

Huckleberry Finn in order to show the interpretive possibilities of the idea of “gender”, the concept or entry under her charge to define. Jehlen makes the Judith Lotus episode a major source of Huck’s faint awareness of how male and female roles are socially constructed and also of his own moral perception: “This episode culminates Huck’s moral and political ascension; he will not rise higher in the rest of the novel but rather slide back” (p. 510) The author links Huck’s still half-formed idea of a male identity to a new, albeit unnoticed, connection of class with Jim, when he leaves Judith and meets the slave on the island with an urgent “They’re after us!”. For her, by operating gender in such paradigms that lay bare the ideological workings of power relations on men and women, it is possible to maintain that Huck somehow “gauges the radical reach of his alienation, and plumbs the depth of its terrors.” (p. 516)

Frederick Crews counters a number of Walker’s claims, and most of Jehlen’s. In contrast to Walker’s characterization of Huck at the end of the novel as trying to escape from “the ‘female’ virtues he has struggled so hard to attain”, Crews points that the boy never struggled to attain any virtue, which makes for a great deal of the moral irony in the narrative, since the character starts and ends it by resisting any attempt to be “sivilized”. He altogether disagrees with Jehlen – and so do we – when she comments on the boy’s “moral ascension” in that it is through having Jim as an example of dignity before him and living with him on the raft that Huck gauges his attitude. Crews calls for more attention to the “need for empirical accountability in literary studies” when he complains that many of those critics’ views are due to a political and academic agenda rather than to a “loyalty to literary fact” (p. 525). Martha Woodmansee refutes some of Crews’s views, arguing that an empirical account of any given text is prone to interpretation, and the assumptions taken as a basis for that operation may foreground a certain aspect of that text in detriment to others, in this way highlighting certain

concerns or shades of meaning which might have gone unnoticed in other interpretive modes of analysis.

Another critical approach which can be said to have arisen from the developments of feminism and gender studies proposes to study the literary work in the light of aspects bearing on issues of sexual identity or sexuality in its broad range. A major area of this kind of study was, and to a lesser extent still is, called “gay and lesbian studies”, but over the last years there has been a shift to “queer studies” or, in its most frequent denomination, “queer theory”. By focusing on how texts portray the expression of sexuality and the meanings attributed to the tensions, processes of identification and relationships among characters, tracking the construction of identity or identities – maleness, femaleness, homosexuality – in their fluid and complex nature, this approach envisages a new reading of aspects which questions the idea of sexuality as a binary opposition “heterosexual/homosexual” and calls for alternative views on the manifold manifestations of human desire and sexual expression, challenging the very concept of “identity” as a coherent, unified and stable set of individual and social elements. Considered even by its main proponents a category in the process of formation, queer (theory) is set as a “zone of possibilities” (EDELMAN, p. 114) as regards the study of sexual categories and identities, resisting to abandon its “definitional indeterminacy and elasticity”, as Jagose puts it, and aims at describing

those gestures or analytical models which dramatise incoherencies in the allegedly stable relations between chromosomal sex, gender and sexual desire. Resisting that model of stability – which claims heterosexuality as its origin, when it is more properly its effect – queer focuses on mismatches between sex, gender and desire. (1996, p. 3)

One example of the application of some of the tenets of queer theory can be seen in Christopher Looby’s article “‘Innocent Sexuality’: The Fiedler Thesis in Retrospect” (1995).

The title makes reference to Leslie Fiedler's essay "Come Back to the Raft Ag'in, Huck Honey!", published originally in *Partisan Review* in 1948. In it, Fiedler makes a very controversial claim: not only does the canon of American literature portray a "national myth of masculine love", but the homoerotic aspects present in such works as *Huckleberry Finn* and Melville's *Moby Dick* are an indication of the "implacable nostalgia for the infantile" on the part of American men. He states that the greatest literary encounters in the fiction of the United States "celebrate, all of them, the mutual love of *a white man and a colored.*" (p. 531), although this love, Fiedler hastens to make clear, is a "chaste male love" (p 530), "possessing an innocence above suspicion" (p. 529). Facing a stormy reaction immediately after the publication of the essay, Fiedler reworked some of his assertions in a later work, *Love and Death in the American Novel*, where the phrase "innocent homosexuality" is used to refer to the "loving male interracial couple[s] that he discovered insistently in the novels he discussed." (Looby, 535).

Focusing on this and other phrases Fiedler used, Looby argues, by way of deconstructing them, that the essay was full of homophobic connotations, and even contradictions. So is the case with the reference to homosexuality as a "stubborn" social fact, which implies an unwilling acceptance of a situation, at the same time that he calls for a reform in the laws which stigmatise homosexuals; another point is to the famous "innocent homosexuality" turn: "Innocent, one wants to know, as opposed to what? The implication is that there is some other, "guilty", form of homosexuality." (p. 538) In these and many other examples, Looby analyses how a liberal progressive view, which Fiedler claimed to espouse, was invested with such rhetoric bias that it ended up invalidating some of its assumptions, e.g. when Fiedler refers to the "astonishing naiveté" of only-men meetings "that breeds at once endless opportunities for inversion and the terrible reluctance to admit its existence, to surrender the

last believed-in stronghold of love without passion.” (Fiedler, p. 529-30). It is worth noting that this “reluctance” can be paralleled to the kind of tension or fear that hovers above a number of male relationships and to which they should resist, with an intensity that Eve Sedgwick calls male homosexual panic:

Because the paths of male entitlement, especially in the nineteenth century, required certain intense male bonds that were not readily distinguishable from the most reprobate bonds, an endemic and ineradicable state of what I am calling male homosexual panic became the normal condition of male heterosexual entitlement. (Sedgwick, p. 185)

The main point of Looby’s argument, following Michel Foucault’s critical ideas, is that the categories heterosexual/homosexual were conceptually in formation at the time Twain’s novel was published, and were not readily available as a specific frame of mind or sexual identity in the second half of the nineteenth-century, and he warns against the reductive effect of constraining Huck and Jim’s relationship – or any other, for that matter – into so close a pair as gay/straight. Acting on the notion of the instability of identities – one of the major theoretical underpinnings of queer theory – and, contrary to what one might expect from an approach which is often popularly misconstrued to be about “outing the characters in literature”, argues that

[w]hat we can say is that Twain portrayed a loving interracial male same-sex bond in all of its dense affectional complexity, with all of its social inscrutability, and portrayed it within the ambiguous and tragic historical circumstances that made it so hard to understand and represent. (p. 550)

What we see operating in those critical exchanges seems not only each scholar’s theoretical affiliation or ideological stance, but the terms in which a prominent literary work ignites strong responses, and the plethora of critical positions that new developments in cultural theory may yield, adding to the existing array of perspectives on books, characters, authors and what they all mean in the sociocultural background they help inform. That such

interpretations were offered for *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* may have made discussions further compounded, if we take into account the place this novel has not only in American literature, exemplified by Hemingway's praise, but also in its broad culture, since it has reached, Jonathan Arac (1997) argues, what he termed "hypercanonization" – a work on which so many political and ideological meanings were superimposed (such as "the quintessential American novel") that any hint at aspects that might not share in that laudatory tradition is met with prompt dismissal and heated debate.

In dealing with aspects convergent on issues of gender and sexuality in *Huckleberry Finn*, our purpose has been to sample some of the latest developments in the critical forums where the novel has been chosen as a special locus for the dynamic encounter of assumptions, contradictions, theorizing and exemplification since its publication, sparking a multitude of immensely varied critical perspectives. Although those issues come from fields of research which are relatively recent or, in the case of queer theory, fairly inchoate, they signal to an ongoing reflection on all the complex facets of human life and art, to which the aspects addressed here should not go unnoticed, or, as Goldberg and Menon claim:

We must never presume to know in advance how questions of sexuality will intersect with or run aslant the prevailing forms of sociality marked by gender or status or the relation of such questions to the objects of a more literary investigation, whether tied to the traditional objects of literary study or a broader sense of the discursive. (2005, p. 1609)

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