

Three journeys of selfdiscovery essay

[War, World War 2](#)



Abstract

This paper will compare and contrast the three named novels: The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn by Mark Twain, Emma by Jane Austen, My Name is Asher Lev by Chaim Potok as bildungromans – that is, novels about growing up. Each of the central characters – Emma, Huck and Asher – grow to maturity by the end of each novel, having struggled through various difficulties. The three novels were written at very different times and are set in very different societies, but they are linked by the growth and development of the central characters. This growth is moral, not merely physical and involves a journey (sometimes internal) to discover their true selves, or the truth, or the difference between right and wrong. In examining the changes that each character undergoes this paper will consider common literary techniques or thematic concerns which link the novels together, even where the writer has used that technique or presented that thematic concern in a slightly different way or with a slightly different emphasis. There are also major differences between all three novels.

The central characters in all three of these eponymous novels face hard decisions about their lives, despite their completely different backgrounds. Emma, the central character of Emma by Jane Austen, is an intelligent young woman of good family who is faced with the decision of whom to marry. Huck Finn, the central character of The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, who is on the run on a raft journey down the Mississippi, is forced to confront his own attitudes to racism and slavery. In My Name is Asher Lev by Chaim Potok, Asher Lev is part of a tightly knit sect of orthodox Jews and is forced

to choose between remaining faithful to his religious background or following his true vocation as an artist – a vocation which is disparaged by his father and his sect. All three protagonists face decisions and have to make choices, and in the course of reaching the decisions they grow and change. Zwinkler (2003, page 229) sums it up well:

Emma, Huck and Lev must choose to conform to society's mores or not, but only Emma has a genuine choice. Huck and Asher are American outsiders and their only recourse is to escape society completely; by contrast, Emma has the choice of either joining the world as represented by Mrs Elton or the world represented by Mr Knightley.

This paper will explore the difference in the endings of all three novels.

Is there a turning point in each novel where the central character makes their decision or understands something about themselves? In *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, published in 1884, but set in the period prior to the American Civil War which began in 1861, has a key moment when Huck makes his decision. Emma too has a single incident which sums up the dilemma of the protagonist, but *My Name is Asher Lev* lacks one central turning point which forces the protagonist to face their dilemma. In Chapters XV and XVI of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Huck leaves the raft having decided to turn Jim in as a runaway slave but as he approaches the shore, he changes his mind and protects Jim. This is a crucial moment in the novel: Huck has been brought up to regard African-Americans as inferior, but here he is true to his friendship with Jim – regardless of the colour of skin. He

consciously rebels against the values of his society. Earlier we had been prepared for Huck's decision by his apology to Jim after tricking him:

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 a done that one if I'd a knowed it would make him feel that way. (Twain, 1884, page 128)

In Emma the turning point is the Box Hill Party when Emma says some very unkind words to Miss Bates, solely because she wants to amuse Mrs Elton and Frank Churchill. It is only afterwards that she realizes how appallingly she has behaved to Miss Bates. This too is a turning point in the novel:

Emma is most embarrassed about Mr Knightley's reaction to her bad behaviour and, the more she contemplates how much she values Mr Knightley's opinion, she realizes that she loves him and when he proposes to her, she accepts. In My Name is Asher Lev there is, in a sense, no single turning point: from the very start of the novel we know that Asher's desire to draw and paint is disapproved of by his father and Asher's moving away from his father takes the whole novel, before he decides to go and live in Europe at the end of the novel. However, there is a moment in Chapter 13 which represents a moment of insight for Asher. Alone in Paris he realizes why he is so happy:

Away from my world, alone in an apartment that offered me neither memories nor roots, I began to find old and distant memories of my own, long buried by pain and time and slowly brought to the surface now by the sight of waiting white canvases and by the winter emptiness of the small

Parisian street. It was time for that. (Potok, 1972, page 281)

The question of the authorial voice is an interesting one when we look across all three texts. Huck and Asher tell their own stories in a first-person narrative (but with a difference), while in Emma Austen writes, we assume, as the omniscient author while showing the reader Emma's perspective often in the course of the novel. Huck tells his story in the voice of a young boy recollecting recent events, and so his voice is that of an innocent observer of events and people. Asher tells the story of his life, looking back at his childhood, without innocence and from the perspective of an adult who knows what is going to happen. Austen plays tricks with the reader by allowing us to know only what Emma knows – and some of the revelations towards the end of the novel are as surprising to the reader as they are to Emma: the truth about Frank Churchill and Jane, for example, and all the false assumptions that Emma has made concerning other people through the novel.

These different narrative voices are intimately connected with irony. Because Huck is a child he reports what he sees without comment and without judgement, but, the adult reader of the novel can often see the truth and this creates a constant ironic tone. In Emma, because Emma's mistakes are not fully revealed until the end of the novel, the irony acts retrospectively as we look back on events and people that Emma and the reader has seriously misjudged. As Zwinkler (2003, page 213) writes, " Emma is a novel that everyone must read twice, because it is only on a second reading that one can be fully aware of the irony in which the novel is steeped." In My Name is Asher Lev there are some incidental ironies: as a child Asher gets used to be

ing known as “ Asher Lev, the son of Reb Arleh Lev”(Potok, 1972, page 79), and by the end of the novel his father knows that as Asher’s fame as an artist grows he will become known as “ Reb Lev, the father of the artist Asher Lev”. However, irony is not central to Potok’s novel in a way that is in Twain’s and Austen’s. Overall, My Name is Asher Lev is much more serious in tone than the other two novels.

Because irony is central to two of these novels: Austen and Twain use it to satirize certain aspects of their societies. Twain satirizes the pretentious hollowness of Southern society as Huck and Jim encounter it on their travels down the river: the false honour and chivalry of the Sandersons and Grangerfords; the King and the Duke who swindle whole towns out of substantial amounts of cash; the vile attitudes to racism. Huck takes a moral stance on their activities, describing their words as “ all that kind of humbug talky talk!, “ all that kind of rot and slush” and “ soul-butter and hog-wash” – “ It was enough to make a body ashamed of the human race.” (Twain, 1884, 189) What does Huck want? According to Tanner (1965, pages 171-172)

He wants a society scoured of deceit and hypocrisy, of inequality and cruelty, a land where the sound heart dominates the perversities of the mind, a language unclouded by misleading accretions of rhetoric and romance and capable of an honest unpretentious to-the-pointness which his own way of speaking comes close to exemplifying to perfection.

Poirier (1966, page 176) explicitly links the episode at Box Hill with Chapter XV in The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn. At Box Hill Emma gives in to “ the theatrical urgings and flatteries of Frank Churchill, while Huck often acts in

imitation of the ‘ style’ of Tom Sawyer even when it doesn’t suit him.”

(Poirier, 1966, page 171) Tom would never apologize to Jim or acknowledge their common humanity; Mr Knightley would never say to Miss Bates the awful things that Emma says, merely to amuse Frank Churchill and Mrs Elton. Poirier writes:

We have before us the creation of words of a whole society built on games, tricks and illusions, and the adult version is only superficially different from the children’s, 185

He is writing about Twain, but his words might be applied almost exactly to the world of Emma. We get the strong sense that Huck would see through Frank Churchill’s deceit more quickly than Emma does. Austen satirizes, more gently, two things: the nouveau riche characters with no morality like Mrs Elton and the duplicity of Frank Churchill; in addition , she satirizes Emma herself and her assumptions and mistakes. Austen is making a serious point here – English society has no accepted social role for wealthy intelligent women – they can be only daughters, wives and mothers. Part of Emma’s problem is that she has too much time on her hands to speculate and think about trivial matters. Potok does not satirize anything in Asher Lev: although there is conflict in the novel between Asher and the Ladover orthodox community, Potok and his protagonist have too much respect for orthodox Judaism to indulge in any satire of it. My Name is Asher Lev is more sombre in tone than the other two novels.

The ends of the three novels vary greatly. Huck shows he has grown up by his reaction to Tom’s plan to rescue Jim (who is already free anyway) – “

Confound it, Tom! It's foolish!" (Twain, 1884, page 228), but disillusioned with the tricks and falseness of society turns his back on it at the end of the novel. As Tanner puts it (1972, page 28) " Huck gives up language and makes for a mythical wordless West." Emma too turns her back on the deceit and trickery of Frank Churchill and the pretentiousness of Mrs Elton by marrying Mr Knightley. Chaim is asked to leave and live abroad by his father, and for the sake of his art Asher knows he must leave the stifling atmosphere of the Ladover sect. His father says to him:

I do not hold with those who believe that all painting and sculpture is from the sitra achra[the forces of evil]. I believe such gifts are from the Master of the Universe. But they have to be used wisely, Asher. What you have done has caused harm. People are angry.... I will ask you not to continue living here, Asher Lev. I will ask you to go away. (Potok, 1972, page 318)

From the evidence of these novels it would seem that American protagonists must turn their back on their past and escape their society in order to grow up and be free, but British heroines are able to reconcile themselves with society through the right decisions based on self-knowledge and a recognition of the truth.

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