

**Research Article****Ideas of destiny and providence in American literature:  
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Received 12 March 2023 ● Revised 2 June 2023 ● Accepted 25 June 2023

**Citation:** Baranova, K. M., Shalimova, N. S. (2022). Ideas of destiny and providence in American literature: From realism to modernism. *Lingua Multica*, 1(1), 67–74.

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**Abstract**

This article examines changes that have taken place in the interpretation of ideas of destiny and providence in American literature during the two centuries of its development. Typical features of these changes in the novels by prominent American writers Mark Twain and J. D. Salinger are explored. To identify specific elements of the ideas in the books under discussion, the authors have made a detailed investigation of these writers, as well as the structures and symbols in their works. The article offers a conclusion about different aspects of concepts analyzed in the 19th and 20th centuries. Problems of religion and morality have preserved their significance for the US population since the country's foundation.

**Keywords**

American literature, destiny, protagonist, providence, self-identification, teenager

**Introduction**

Two centuries ago, the USA witnessed significant changes in society regarding religion and philosophy. The religious crisis among Americans at that time is noted by some scholars (Baritz, 1964). It causes the lack of faith in God for many citizens. The above-mentioned component in their lives in the second half of the 19th century was no longer as important as it used to be. These points are reflected in the works of realist writers, which include Mark Twain (1835–1910), one of the most original and popular authors in the United States. 20th century authors continue to research this issue in their works, although its meaning has changed. However, the ideas of destiny and providence are still the most important features of poetics, as the novel *The Catcher in the Rye* (1954) by J. D. Salinger (1919–2010) shows.

**Methods**

To identify the specifics of destiny and providence throughout two centuries in classical American literature, the authors of this article use comparative and narrative analyses as their main working methods.

Various approaches to distinguishing the essence of the concepts under analysis

(psychological aspects of the characters' growing-up, the meaning of their beliefs) make this the object of investigation in different studies devoted to the matter in modern literary studies (Chupryna et al., 2018; Baranova and Fedorenko, 2022). These novels written by Mark Twain and J. D. Salinger have been used as the material which reveals some leading tendencies of US literature.

The theoretical significance of the results presented in the article can be identified as the specification of destiny and providence in the prose of American realists and modernists. The research contributes to the development of narrative studies. It highlights existential experience and teenagers' self-identification (Zheltukhina et al., 2023) and also emphasizes the importance of the ideas touched upon in connection with the aforementioned trends in the US literary process.

The practical vector of the article enables the results of the investigation to be used in teaching American literature, as well as the theory of literature (Tareva and Tarev, 2017).

## Discussion

In 1876, M. Twain's stand-out novel *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* was published. The concepts in question are presented there with a slight degree of irony, and are not perceived by people in the conventional way. Society in those years was beginning to understand that it was not reasonable to rely in everything only on the Creator, that it was vital for people to build their own destiny themselves. Faith in predestination still existed, but the attitude to that phenomenon had become quite altered. This point of view is reflected in the above-mentioned novel, which focuses on the lives of two American boys: Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn (Huck Finn).

The characters of the novel treat the idea of God's plans and providence differently. For example, Widow Douglas, one of the town's residents where the events take place, sincerely believes that everything depends on the Lord's will, but most of the townspeople only formally pay tribute to the Puritan traditions. Very few of them have true religious beliefs, but the ideas of destiny, faith and providence are still present in their lives. The same acceptance of religion can be observed in the adolescent characters. Thus, Tom and Huck have no doubt that both praise and punishment are premeditated by the higher powers, and they obtain them rather at the level of belief in certain prejudices. But real life gives the boys very specific and peculiar surprises: what they think is bound to happen does not always happen. Therefore, for example, in one of the episodes, when, as researchers emphasize, "superstition does not work" (Afanasjeva, 2012, p. 12), Tom instantly finds the reason for this as the boy blames the witch and her influence:

*He puzzled over the matter some time, and finally decided that some witch had interfered and broken the charm* (Twain, 2011, p. 63).

Tom realizes that it is necessary to follow religious tenets but he regards this as an unfortunate obligation, and often tries to break these rules. The teenager is not interested in prayers, and he tries to evade this boring procedure whenever possible:

*Tom turned in without the added vexation of prayers, and Sid made mental note of the omission* (Twain, 2011, p. 24).

In another episode, where Tom explains how he obtained a copy of the Bible, he uses deception, which in religious terms is regarded as a kind of sin, yet the protagonist does not care. The teenager is rather pragmatic and is not going to delve into the texts and the divine truth. It is essential for him to receive this important-for-all-believers book in the form of the prize just to be respected by his peers:

*...Tom's mental stomach had never really hungered for one of those prizes, but unquestionably his entire being had for many a day longed for the glory and the éclat that came*

*with it*" (Twain, 2011, p. 29).

The course of the boy's reflection is clear. It is vital for him to achieve the goal in order to have influence among his peers. That is why the violation of Christian morality, which happens in this case, is treated as a minor factor. Following society's obligatory rules, the boy shows the adults that he obeys their requirements, although they only burden him.

However, despite the negative attitude towards the notion of the providential nature of what is happening, Tom admits that the punishment for bad actions may come from God. This is how he regards the storm, which he believes is a manifestation of the Creator's grudge:

*And that night there came on a terrific storm <...> He believed he had taxed the forbearance of the powers above to the extremity of endurance, and that this was the result...* (Twain, 2011, p. 155).

The Almighty was not satisfied by the teenager's behaviour and decided to use His own power. Superstitiousness, which the author ironically presents as the result of the manifestation of divine power, is repeatedly encountered in the course of the development of the plot. So, noticing a worm on his leg, Tom concludes that this is an omen:

*He [Tom] sat as still as a stone, with his hopes rising and falling by turns as the creature <...> came decisively down upon Tom's leg <...> that meant that he was going to have a new suit of clothes ...* (Twain, 2011, p. 100–101).

The boy believes the worm is God's prophecy that he will soon have the new suit he dreams of. By introducing this naive boyish explanation of the Almighty's work, the writer reveals the pragmatic essence of religious dogmas and the teenager's ironic attitude towards them.

Other friends' expectations, which they regard as providential, are also shown ironically in the narration. So, Tom and Huck are aware that the doctor's murderer is Injun Joe, though the latter convinces everyone that it is Muff Potter. The boys have no doubt that Joe's actions and words can never get the approval of God. They are sure the Creator will punish the Indian:

*Then Huckleberry and Tom stood dumb <...> expecting <...> the clear sky would deliver God's lightnings upon his head, and wondering to see how long the stroke was delayed* (Twain, 2011, p. 83).

Nevertheless, God's punishment is postponed. Despite the delay of the expected censure, the two friends are sure that their conviction is right. They just ascribe the result to the fact that Joe had some connections with the devil. The irony in implementing the ideas of destiny and providence in the text are seen in Tom's comparison of the church and the circus. At the same time, it proves that the adolescent prefers the latter:

*I've been to the circus three or four times — lots of times. Church ain't shucks to a circus* (Twain, 2011, p. 57).

In other words, the protagonist shows some disapproval of the religious institution, which still has a significant impact on the life of American society in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. A certain insincerity from fellow citizens in relation to the significance of religion is also evident in another episode of the novel. Tom, along with the other parishioners, is in the church listening to the priest's sermon. The boy is not interested in the content, he is bored to death and focuses his attention on the poodle and the insects (a beetle and a fly) that appear inside the hall. The adult members of the congregation do the same, they are not listening to what the cleric is saying:

*By this time the whole church was red-faced and suffocating with suppressed laughter,*

*and the sermon had come to a dead standstill...* (Twain, 2011, p. 41).

This episode proves once again that for many Americans the church is not really an important institution and plays only a secondary role in society. Most people attend religious events out of choice, and even sometimes do inappropriate things during the service.

The analysis of the text clearly shows some very important changes in attitudes to religious dogmas. The same can be applied to the motifs of destiny and providence. Tom, together with a group of teenagers, comes into the church when everything is ready for a funeral. This fact the parishioners and the boys' relatives accept as a manifestation of God's will, for which they thank Him. However, the adults are well aware that the children have just tricked them. The outward expression of gratitude to the Creator and falsehood of reality come into conflict with each other, which is ironically shown by the author. All citizens follow the words of the priest: "*Praise God from whom all blessings flow ...*" (Twain, 2011, p. 126). In other words, the children's salvation is attributed to higher forces, for which the people thank the Lord. The author depicts this opposition to reality as especially important in the above-mentioned passage, and offers some explanations from the church minister which are supported by all present.

In 1884, Mark Twain's novel *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* was published. This sequel to *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* is also known in most countries of the world. The main character is Huck, and the story is told from his point of view. The matters that the author raises in his narration are the issues of slavery and freedom, which were very relevant in that period of time. The plot's main development takes place during a trip on the Mississippi River. It is made by Huck with a coloured man, Jim by name, whom the boy helped to escape. This is only the external course of events. In fact, here the novelist meditates on the significance of spiritual values, on the formation of personality and the search for true freedom. This writer's work can be perceived as a novel, the symbol of which is the river. After all, on the one hand, the mighty Mississippi symbolizes the current of real life, and on the other, it shows the path to adolescence, its development, the road along which the search for spiritual values takes place. The ideas of destiny and providence are also clearly seen in the novel.

The protagonist constantly expresses his doubts about the basic postulates of Puritanism, he constantly seeks appropriate alternative views. He is bored by stories about the Prophet Moses, who died a long time ago. The teenager is not interested in stories about Paradise either, because his best friend will not get there anyway. Huck, as well as Tom, is pragmatic. From his point of view, any prayer should necessarily bring practical benefits, otherwise it is absolutely useless:

*Then Miss Watson <...> prayed, but nothing come of it. She told me to pray every day, and whatever I asked for I would get it. But it warn't so* (Twain: URL).

Huck tries to pray to God to escape the consequences of his wrongdoing. He wants to do something good that is associated with the established rules of good behaviour.

Huck compares Miss Watson's teaching to Douglas' understanding of God's work. The boy comes to the conclusion that there are two Gods. One of them is not so severe and terrible, and this is the God of the widow. However, the second one, Miss Watson's Lord, who is the true Puritan God, punishes everyone:

*I judged I could see that there was two Providences, and a poor chap would stand <...> with the widow's Providence, but if Miss Watson's got him there warn't no help for him* (Twain: URL).

The teenager tries to abide by the former, although he sees no benefit in that:  
*I would belong to the widow's if he wanted me, though I couldn't make out how he was*



*a-going to be any better ...* (Twain: URL).

Huck wants to inform Miss Watson of Jim's whereabouts. He knows he has to do that. But, at the same time, the boy realizes his friend's desire for freedom and believes Jim deserves it. The teenager remembers his kindness and feels he cannot betray the coloured man. Thus, the boy has got a problem: to tell Miss Watson everything, or to be silent about the place where her fugitive slave is. Huck cannot find the only possible correct answer. From one perspective, he should act as it is required by society's laws. From the other perspective, this solution is betrayal of his friend. Furthermore, Huck is convinced that Jim like any individual has the right to be free, and the boy is sure that the Creator also sees his doubts:

*... here was the plain hand of Providence slapping me in the face <...> [I] was being watched all the time from up there in heaven ...* (Twain: URL).

Since providence is all-seeing, the boy understands that he will get to hell:

*"... people that acts as I'd been acting about that nigger goes to everlasting fire"* (Twain: URL).

Hence, in Huck's philosophical reasoning the author tries to show a peculiar victory of human qualities over society's prejudices. However, the boy still doubts that God really exists. He is not inclined to believe the great role of destiny and providence in real life, but thinks that God may be watching him when he does something wrong. At times Huck cannot even utter the words of a prayer, as he has not sincerely repented:

*And I about made up my mind to pray <...>. So, I kneeled down. But the words wouldn't come* (Twain: URL).

Trying to find the reasons for this event, the boy again returns to the problems connected with the all-seeing eye of the Lord:

*"Why wouldn't they? It warn't no use to try and hide it from Him"* (Twain: URL).

Analyzing God's actions, the teenager tends to think of His ability to precisely interpret the origin of events that happen:

*"It was because my heart warn't right; it was because I warn't square; it was because I was playing double"* (Twain: URL).

Huck is conscious of his inability to utter words of repentance. He explains it by the fact that inside he is torn apart by contradictory feelings:

*"He knowed it. You can't pray a lie - I found that out"* (Twain: URL).

It is impossible to pray and lie simultaneously – that is Huck's final conclusion.

Summing up the analysis of the novels *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, it is possible to say that they are opposed to the peculiar boring didacticism of children's books, which had always distinguished Puritan culture. Being a realist writer, Mark Twain emphasizes the belief in predestination among his fellow citizens throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century. However, the power of this belief is waning considerably. The novelist also shows the changes that have taken place in society and the whole institution of the church's and religious dogmas.

*The Catcher in the Rye* by J. D. Salinger is one of the most important novels about maturation in 20<sup>th</sup> century US literature. The book is narrated by teenager Holden Caulfield, who explains what happened to him during a few days in New York (Afanasjeva et al., 2020). The young man was expelled from school, he wandered around the city, met different people and in the novel the boy shares his thoughts and feelings with the reader. The title of the book is linked with ideas of destiny and providence, as well as the indirect reference to the Almighty. The literal translation of the noun *catcher* into Russian conceals

its important connotations, which allude to “the savior of human souls”, as Christ sometimes is referred to. The storyteller’s dream is to catch children who are playing on the edge of the precipice, to prevent the misfortune that can take place. In other words, he is trying to protect them from doing wrong.

The events described in the novel happened just before Christmas. Holden emphasizes this fact at the beginning of the book: *“This madman stuff that happened to me around last Christmas”* (Salinger, 2006, p. 5). This period is traditionally connected with the motif of birth and wonder, the opportunity to turn to God and reflect on various things. The events depicted in the text take place within three days (Saturday, Sunday, Monday). These days bring certain symbolism into the narrative. Saturdays are filled with memories as the protagonist analyzes his life; Sunday is dedicated to the teenager’s confession when he honestly tells his sister that he has done wrong; while Monday is associated by him with the opportunity to begin a new period in his life. The Christmas rush, the holiday atmosphere, the anticipation of a miracle is described by the narrator in a positive way: *“So it wasn’t too bad walking on Fifth Avenue. It was fairly Christmasy”* (Salinger, 2006, p. 65). However, this period of the year is not very pleasant despite the fact that it is associated with the family holiday, the warmth of home comfort, the expectation of miracles and the Christmas church service. Cold and desolation become essential in the description of this pre-Christmas time. These moments amplify the main character’s loneliness and sense of hopelessness.

The time shown in the text is related to the teenager’s appeal to God, which can be understood in different ways. First of all, the ideas of providence and destiny are realized in connection with the boy’s reflections on the Bible, Christ and the apostles. The problem of true and false faith is shown in the episode of his meeting with the nuns: gentleness predominates in the air. Holden treats them with sympathy and compassion. The opposite feeling can be seen in the description of the Christmas mime:

*It’s supposed to be religious as hell, I know, and very pretty and all, but I can’t see anything religious or pretty, for God’s sake, about a bunch of actors carrying crucifixes all over the stage <...> I said old Jesus probably would’ve puked if He could see it - all those fancy costumes and all* (Salinger, 2006, p. 120).

The most evaluative phrases are those highlighted in the quotation, because the participants of the performance are called “a bunch of actors carrying crucifixes”. The end of the play is accompanied by the following comment made by the teenager:

*When they were all finished and started going out the boxes again, you could tell they could hardly wait to get a cigarette or something* (Salinger, 2006, p. 121).

Holden emphasizes the “phony” enthusiastic behaviour of the audience because people want to see the end as they wish to get on with their daily routine. True and false beliefs are again opposed in another episode of the novel. Although Holden Caulfield has a direct dialogue with God and sincerely believes that everything beautiful and good on earth is connected with Him, the guidance of his teacher, who preaches similar views, is presented in a sarcastic way:

*Then he started telling us how he was never ashamed, when he was in some kind of trouble or something, to get right down his knees and pray to God <...> He said he talked to Jesus all the time. Even when he was driving his car* (Salinger, 2006, p. 32).

The call to talk to God when any problem arises, addressing Him as a friend, even when driving, makes Holden smile. This is due to the teenager’s special sensitivity to sincere and insincere intentions, his ability to distinguish deceitful values from genuine cordiality. The idea of false faith is demonstrated during Christmas. At the beginning of

the novel, Holden's friend Sally invites him to decorate the tree:

*Are you or aren't you coming over to help me trim the tree Christmas Eve? I have to know* (Salinger, 2006, p. 82). Although only a few days have passed, the boy watches that very Christmas tree, which is now surplus to requirements, being pulled from the truck with the following comment: *"Hold the sonuvabitch up! Hold it up, for Chrissake!"* (Salinger, 2006, p. 132). The boy pays attention to the discrepancy of these words with the subject of conversation: *"It certainly was a gorgeous way to talk about a Christmas tree"* (Salinger, 2006, p. 132). It is possible to see bitter irony in his thoughts. According to the narrator, the moment when the tree is thrown away is a "magnificent" way to discuss it. This symbol develops the theme of true and false faith: the external attributes of Christmas are deprived of any significance for people and serve only as material objects.

It is to the Lord that the boy most often confesses that he is mad and asks for His protection and patronage: *"I swear to God I'm a madman"* (Salinger, 2006, p. 72). In most desperate situations the teenager relies on providence and believes in destiny. The word "God" is used in the novel more than a hundred times. The storyteller usually begins a lot of phrases with the words: *"I swear to God"*. He utters them repeatedly. The most common word for the narrator is "goddam". Thus, the ideas of providence and destiny are revealed in the speech of a rebellious protagonist. Despite the criticism of the outside world, the rejection of reality, deep down Holden relies on the Creator and hopes for His help. This fact makes providence and destiny important constituents of social and cultural values within American society (Chupryna and Baranova, 2022).

## Conclusion

Ideas of providence and destiny have deep significance for American writers of the 19th and 20th centuries. However, the attitude of the inhabitants of the country to these issues changes significantly during this period, which is reflected in the works analyzed above. The interpretation of the ideas in question is substantially transformed, and themes connected with providence and destiny can be interpreted ironically by these authors. A certain loss in their significance during the 19th century appears to be forgotten in their further development as they are revived again in the works of American modernists of the 20th century, though with new and sometimes unexpected outcomes.

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*The authors have declared no conflict of interest.*

*The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.*