

## **Masteroppgave**

### ***The River Potential and the River Chronotope***

*Reading Rivers in Mark Twain's The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn and  
Cormac McCarthy's Suttree*

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Masteroppgaven er gjennomført som et ledd i utdanningen ved Universitetet i Agder og er godkjent som sådan. Denne godkjenningen innebærer ikke at universitetet innestår for de metoder som er anvendt og de konklusjoner som er trukket.

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*He slept and in his sleep he saw his friends again and they were coming downriver on muddy floodwaters [...]. A fog more obscure closed away their figures gone a sadder way by psychic seas across the Tarn of Acheron. From a rock in the river he waved them farewell but they did not wave back.<sup>2</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Illustration of Dante's *The Divine Comedy* by Gustave Doré: Inferno, Canto 03: *The Doomed Souls embarking to cross the Acheron* (Doré, web page).

<sup>2</sup> McCarthy, 1989, p. 190

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## *Introduction*

The river has since ancient times had an important role in relation to cosmology, ritual and ethnography. The vast range of the river's symbolic connotations is closely connected to its physical qualities as well as to human longings for explanatory models. In general, the river represents something basic from which there can be made metaphoric and structural parallels to fundamental aspects of the human being. A profound parallel is that both river and human being can be seen as 'unities of opposites' – e.g. they are, simultaneously, consistent and in constant change. Such parallels render possible the river a powerful image for use in everyday language and in literature. The aim of this thesis is to show how river images in literature may function as a device for amplifying various textual and human 'structures'.

Realising that a striking amount of literature I have read contained, in one shape or another, a river, made me aware that there was a close relationship between the river and literary characters in these works. The fact that the river is also a central feature in various ancient sources of myth and religion, made me open my eyes to a connection between the river and the human being as phenomena. There must be something special about the river that makes it such a profound, although sometimes subtle, image.

Naturally, a *complete* account for the river and its function and effects in literature would be a task far outside the limits for this thesis. Subsequently, a complete account is not my aim.

Rather, the aim is to point to the river's *potential* in literature, and I have chosen to analyse its role in texts written at different points in time, approximately a century apart, via the *River Chronotope*. In both of the texts the protagonist's close relationship to a river is central: Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884) and Cormac McCarthy's *Suttree* (1979).

In a 1979 review of *Suttree*, Jerome Charyn commented that it resembles a 'doomed

“Huckleberry Finn” (Charyn, 1979), signalling that there are similarities but also significant differences between the two. As this thesis will show, the contrastive relationship between McCarthy and Twain’s novels, suggested by Charyn, is evident in the novels’ protagonists as well as in their respective river images.

Chapter 1 will initially be an elaboration of my dual view of the river; the River Potential and the River Chronotope. Because of the wide range of symbolic connotations of the river, I claim that its possibilities are open for parallels to the human being independent of historical time. The River Chronotope I believe may be seen as to support the portrayal of various types of literary characters. I will also present my theoretical basis. The primary theoreticians that I rely on are Mikhail Bakhtin, because of his bringing the idea about the chronotope into literary theory; Paul Smethurst, because of his presentation of the *postmodern* chronotope; Joseph Frank, because of his treatment of ‘spatial form’ in modern literature; and W. J. T. Mitchell, because of his expansion of Frank’s notion and for proposing ideas concerning ‘linear’ and ‘tectonic’ *versions* of spatial form.

Chapter 2 and 3 are analyses of, respectively, Mark Twain’s famous novel *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885) and Cormac McCarthy’s novel *Suttree* (1979). In light of ideas presented in Chapter 1, I will qualify my view that the spatio-temporal relations of the river images have central functions in these novels. The rivers in the two texts are very different in character and shape, and when treated in comparison, they show how the River Chronotope can play an important role in the shaping and structuring of very different texts and in amplifying different aspects of literary characters involved.

*‘Gradually the village murmur subsided, and we seemed to be embarked on the placid current of our dreams, floating from past to future as silently as one awakes to fresh morning or evening thoughts’<sup>3</sup>*

## ***Chapter 1:***

### ***Flowing toward a River Chronotope***

#### ***The River Potential***

‘Crossing the Rubicon’, ‘water under the bridge’, ‘stream of consciousness’ – these idioms are only a few examples of how aspects of the river can be transferred into language, and they reflect three very different qualities of the river: as boundary, as something that has already happened and cannot be changed, and as the continuity of human thought. On a small scale examples like these alone can give an impression of how useful an image the river is.

In order to reveal the structural function(s) of the river, I will treat it on two different levels – one based on an understanding of the other. The first level, which I will refer to as the River Potential, concerns the river as phenomenon and its wide range of symbolic connotations derived from physical and metaphysical qualities. This River Potential is a vast resource bank for symbolism concerning aspects of the human being<sup>4</sup> and also concerning *time* and *space*, which are organising categories through which we understand our world. The River Potential is *general* in the way that it is not connected to specific time, space and geographical place but follows all projections of rivers like an ‘echo’.

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<sup>3</sup> (Thoreau, 2006, p. 12)

<sup>4</sup> By the term ‘human being’ I refer to the species of which all persons and literary characters are members, regardless of place and time.

Likely because of its varied physical capacities, the river has through history assumed an important metaphysical role for human beings. Civilizations have for various reasons had a tendency to settle by rivers and, since human societies are influenced by and adapt to the geographical place in which they are situated, the rivers have influenced these societies. Like Edward S. Casey has noted,

‘[w]hatever is true for space and time, this much is true for place: we are immersed in it and could not do without it. To be at all – to exist in any way – is to be somewhere, and to be somewhere is to be in some kind of place. Place is as requisite as the air we breathe, the ground on which we stand, the bodies we have. We are surrounded by places. We walk over them and through them. We live in places, relate to others in them, die in them. Nothing we do is unplaced’ (Casey, 1998, p. ix).

The river is definitely a place; a place that has been influential in many ways.

A passage from Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* shows one reason why the river has an influence on those living near it; it serves as a natural entrance for invasions from enemies and/or colonists; ‘What greatness had not floated on the ebb of that river in to the mystery of an unknown earth! ... The dreams of men, the seed of commonwealths, the germs of empires’ (Conrad, 1996, p. 19). In addition to being an entrance for ‘outsiders’, the river is also central in communication between coast and inland.

Having played a central physical role in people’s lives, the river has also influenced the metaphysical explanations for those living along its banks, i.e. concerning religious and cosmological matters. Prudence J. Jones writes that ‘rivers provide a means of translating abstract ideas about the physical, metaphysical, and temporal structure of the world into a concrete and comprehensible framework’ (Jones, 2005, p. 3). The frequent appearance of water and rivers in idioms like the ones mentioned above, in creation myths, in the ideas of ancient philosophers, and in religious rituals can be seen as to confirm this.

‘Creation myths universally describe how various bodies of water came into being. [...] What we know as scientific fact – that life started in the oceans – the ancients seemed to know intuitively’ (Garry, 2005, p. 490), Jane Garry comments in her *Archetypes and Motifs in Folklore and Literature*, and one example she mentions is the circular river Oceanus which in Greek mythology encircled the earth and was the source of all other rivers. In the creation story of the Christian Bible a river runs through the Garden of Eden watering it.<sup>5</sup> In addition, ‘The River of Life’ is central in the Bible’s very last chapter, in Revelations 22:1: ‘And he showed me a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding from the throne of God and of the Lamb’.<sup>6</sup> Thus, the river can be said to serve as a profound image of the source of life in Western culture.

The idea of water as the original source of can also be spotted in the thinking of Pre-Socratic philosopher Thales of Miletus, who is known to have considered water the first principle and the source of everything (C.f. Skirbekk & Gilje, 1996, p. 26). His successor Heraclitus used the river as a metaphor for the changeable nature of the world. Charles H. Kahn comments about Heraclitus’ fragment L,<sup>7</sup> that it is ambiguous and that this ambiguity ‘serves to emphasize a parallel between the identity of the human bathers and that of the rivers; and this parallel would suggest that the men too remain the same only as a constant pattern imposed on incessant flow’ (Heraclitus & Kahn, 1987, p. 167). Based on observations like these, one can claim that both phenomena, river and human identity, make possible a simultaneous projection of contradicting ideas: They are stable, i.e. stay in a ‘constant pattern’, but are at the same time continuously changing, and they both contain potential for order as well as for dis-order. Thus, the river and the human being can both be seen as ‘unities of opposites’.

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<sup>5</sup> Genesis 2:10, ("The Holy Bible, New King James Version," 2008)

<sup>6</sup> Revelations 22:1, ("The Holy Bible, New King James Version," 2008)

<sup>7</sup> Heraclitus’ fragment L (D. 12, M. 40a): ‘As they step into the same rivers, other and still other waters flow upon them’ (Heraclitus & Kahn, 1987, p. 166).

In rites concerning purification and/or transitions between different phases of life, like baptism and funerary rites, the river has played, and still plays, an important role. One example is Hinduism which considers several rivers holy. The most sacred of them is the Ganges and Hindus believe that bathing in Ganges' holy water will wash away one's sins. Repeated ritualistic washings in the river will secure the bather a place in heaven<sup>8</sup>. The river also has a symbolic function concerning the Christian ritual of baptism, which is a sacrament of spiritual rebirth. In the Gospels one can read that Jesus himself was baptized by John in the river Jordan,<sup>9</sup> making river baptism a powerful symbol in many 'corners' of the world.

Concerning the other 'end' of life one can note that in ancient cultures as widespread as the Aegean, Roman Britain, in the Pacific islands, and among the Inca and Maya of the Americas, it was common to bury the dead with a coin in their mouth (C.f. Grinsell, 1957, pp. 257-258). This coin was meant as a fee to enter the 'Otherworld'. Important in these cultures was the belief that 'either all or part of the journey [to the Otherworld] had to be made by water, which was to be crossed either by boat or in a ferry' (Grinsell, 1957, p. 257). In many cases a ferryman, upon receiving the fee, would carry the dead across the river of the underworld. The best known such mythic ferryman is probably Charon who appears in Virgil's *Aeneid* and Dante Alighieri's *Divina Comedia* carrying the dead across the river Acheron. Thus, rivers and the crossing of them has have had an important symbolic value since ancient times. In these traditions concerning cleansing, baptism, and transition into the afterlife the river symbolises a physical and symbolical boundary or threshold between different phases of life.

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<sup>8</sup> C.f. Encycloedia Mythica, ("Ganga," 2008)

<sup>9</sup> C.f. Matthew 3:13, Mark 1:9, Luke 3:21

Physically, the river is at once life giver and deadly force. On the one hand, it can supply fresh water and fish and is an efficient means of transportation, communication and washing – issues of great importance to human beings. On the other hand, the river is an ‘uncontrollable’ force which can destroy and ruin as well as kill. According to this double nature of the river, it is symbolically associated with life and death, good and evil, baptism and funeral, vein and serpent. The opposites are many, but perhaps the most central ‘pair’ it represents is life and death, which is such an important physical reality as well as having a metaphysical significance; it is a ‘unity of opposites’.

### ***The Chronotope***

The second level in which I will treat the river is a result of the river being a possible metaphor for time and space, and I will call it the River Chronotope. The River Chronotope, unlike the River Potential, is connected to a *specific* literary river image and concerns how this specific river image projects the categories of *time* and *space*.

### **Mikhail Bakhtin**

My term is based on the ideas of Mikhail Bakhtin, who according to Michael Holquist<sup>10</sup> uses the term *chronotope* (literally meaning ‘time-space’) as ‘an optic for reading texts as x-rays of the forces at work in the culture system from which they spring’ (Bakhtin, 1981, pp. 425-426). I.e. if one can ‘decipher’ how a text reflects space and time, this would be related to how space and time are viewed in the world in which the particular text is produced. Initially, the term Chronotope was coined by Albert Einstein as part of his theory of relativity (C.f. Bakhtin, 1981, p. 84). Bakhtin brought the term into literary theory in his ‘Forms of Time and the Chronotope’. A concise definition of what the chronotope is, is difficult to find in his

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<sup>10</sup> Holquist is the translator and editor of the English version of Bakhtin’s *The Dialogic Imagination* of 1981.

essay,<sup>11</sup> and is thus hard to explain in few words here. Still, a premise for Bakhtin's concept is that we organise our experiences in the world through the categories of time and space. In literature, which is a human construct and a representation of the material world, the chronotope is a 'formally constitutive category' (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 84). The temporal and spatial categories are merged in texts, and Bakhtin emphasises their interrelatedness: 'Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history' (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 84). Nonetheless, he considers the temporal aspect of the chronotope to be the most central one in relation to literature.<sup>12</sup>

Importantly, Bakhtin also understands the image of man as chronotopic, i.e. organised and understood via the same categories as the material world and the literary representations of it: 'the chronotope as a formally constitutive category determines to a significant degree the image of man in literature as well. The image of man is always intrinsically chronotopic' (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 85). Bakhtin is cautious to state that art does not represent a 'true' picture of the material world. There is no *direct* reflection, and art and real life are two 'different registers of dialogue that can be conceived only in dialogue. They are both forms of representation; therefore they are different aspects of the same imperative to mediate that defines all human experience' (Holquist, 2001, p. 111). This 'imperative to mediate' is their chronotope, and it serves as the *link* between reality and artistic representations of it.

Bakhtin treats literary chronotopes in two different ways. In the most general way he sees the chronotope as a way of structuring/organising/understanding a text. This idea of the

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<sup>11</sup> As Morson and Emerson have also noted: 'Characteristically for Bakhtin, he never offers a concise definition. Rather, he first offers some initial comments, and then repeatedly alternates concrete examples with further generalizations. In the course of this exposition, the term turns out to have several related meanings' (Morson & Emerson, 1990, pp. 366-367).

<sup>12</sup> '[...] for in literature the primary category in the chronotope is time' (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 85).

chronotope is genre specific and hardly changes over time. What he calls the chronotope of the Greek Romance is one example of this, and as Emerson and Morson have commented, such a 'generic chronotope is [...] a whole complex of concepts, an integral way of understanding experience, and a ground for visualizing and representing human life' (Morson & Emerson, 1990, p. 375). I.e. the chronotope of the Greek Romance is genre defining and contains certain traits and characteristics, which later texts may or may not resemble.

The other way in which Bakhtin uses the term concerns what he calls 'chronotopic motifs'. Of these there are always several in each text and they interact creating tension and dialogue (C.f. Morson & Emerson, 1990, p. 369). Chronotopic motifs are to be related to specific situations and places in texts which carry along some sort of 'echo' of associations. These echoes result from frequent correlation between certain places or situations and what tends to happen there/then. Bakhtin's chronotopes of the road and threshold, and as will be developed below, the chronotope of the river are examples of chronotopic motifs.

As Michael Holquist comments, Bakhtin stresses dialogue which is 'an obvious master key to the assumptions that guided [his] work throughout his whole career' (Holquist, 2001, p. 15). Language and literature is in constant dialogue with what has been and what will become. Likewise, the river is a flowing connection between separate places/stages along its banks and a lasting bond between generations living near it. The stages along the river and expressed points in time are needed for us to differentiate one place, time, or person from another.

### **Paul Smethurst**

Paul Smethurst writes that the foundational premise on which he bases what he calls the *postmodern chronotope* is 'that postmodernism has changed the way the past is re-presented, the contemporary apprehended and the future envisioned, and it has changed fundamentally

perceptions of space and place' (Smethurst, p. 1). He sets out to raise common postmodern features and visualises the connection between the chronotope of the 'postmodern' real world and the postmodern novel through 'the *shape* of the postmodern chronotope' (Smethurst, 2000, p. 9). Features influencing the shape of the chronotope are, most importantly, views of history and trends in science. There is a traditional linear and chronological way of projecting history that can be reflected in literature, but there are also cases where the story of a text is not linked with history in the real world as such a series of events; it is 'a spatialised historiography, history outside the streams of cause and effect' (Smethurst, 2000, p. 18). Postmodern literature can be seen as heavily influenced by such 'dis-orderly' presentation of history and as will become clear in Chapter 3, McCarthy's *Suttree* is an example of this.

Another aspect of influence on the shape of the general chronotope is the current 'paradigms' in science. Whereas the chronotopes of the eras of realism and modernism were influenced by empiricism and behaviourism the postmodern chronotope is 'influenced by chaos theory and ideas from theoretical physics concerning non-directional, non-linear and reversible time' (Smethurst, 2000, p. 19). A disturbed depiction of time is prominent in *Suttree*.

Involving ideas of among others Henri Lefebvre, Smethurst arrives at a theory of the chronotope that, compared to Bakhtin's time-oriented notion, has 'far more emphasis on the dynamics of space' (Smethurst, 2000, p. 10). Henri Lefebvre's theory concerns the idea that social space is a product of 'spatial practice':

'The spatial practice of a society secretes that society's space; it propounds it, in a dialectical interaction; it produces it slowly and surely as it masters and appropriates it. From the analytic standpoint, the spatial practice of a society is revealed through the deciphering of its space' (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 38).

Smethurst points to how, among others, Lefebvre and his theories have been central in a 'spatial turn' in philosophy, which in turn is important in the change in chronotopic emphasis central to Smethurst's theory (C.f. Smethurst, 2000, p. 7).

Bakhtin's idea of the chronotope being an 'optic for reading texts as x-rays' of society, as mentioned above, implies that if society changes, literature will change too. Thus, Smethurst's contribution in *The Postmodern Chronotope* is not, as I see it, so much that he treats a connection between society and literature, but rather, that he points to how and why one can see a change in cultural forces from modernism till postmodernism.

### **Change in Chronotopic Shape**

According to both Bakhtin and Smethurst, a common denominator between the material world, human beings, and their respective literary realisations at a given point in history, is their chronotope. Also, although not necessarily identical, their respective chronotopic shapes have a tendency to correspond, i.e. the shape of the general chronotope of the material world and the shape of the chronotopic 'image of man' at the same historical time are likely to be similar. From one paradigm to another views of time and space may differ, which will have an impact on this chronotopic shape. Thus, in order to visualise a development from one shape to another, it might be possible to 'map' out their different structural tendencies. As I will gradually show, I see a structural development in my material from a 'linear' towards a non-linear 'tectonic' shape, where neither is more or less spatial or temporal than the other, rather there is a difference in *shape*. To make clearer my views of this development I will turn to the language concerning the formalist debate over 'Spatial Form'.

### **Joseph Frank**

'Spatial form' has been subject of scholarly debate since Joseph Frank in 1945 published his influential essay 'Spatial Form in Modern Literature'. In this essay, Frank focuses on 'spatial

form' as a structural literary phenomenon typical of modernism. Nevertheless, what Frank is primarily concerned with is *time* and the *spatialisation* (or near stagnation) of it in literature. He describes spatial form as a literary technique to stop the experience of time flow in literature. As he writes, 'time is the very condition of that flux and change from which, as we have seen, man wishes to escape when he is in a relation of disequilibrium with the cosmos' (Frank, 1968, p. 56). If one looks outside the frames of a formalist concern with the 'text itself', and involve the ideas of the chronotope treated above, one may interpret such a concern with time as a sign of a modern zeitgeist reflecting a concern revolving around progress and hastiness.

One example from literature that reflects a concern with time, like Frank's, can be found in Ernest Hemingway's *In Our Time*. In 'Big Two-Hearted River', the two-part final short story in the collection, presents us with the wounded 'hero' Nick Adams.<sup>13</sup> Wounded from the war he retreats to Big-Two-Hearted River to fish and regain *equilibrium* with the cosmos. By focusing on minute details in nature and on what he does and how to do it, Nick manages (at least for a while) to avoid thinking about the outside world. 'He felt he had left everything behind, the need for thinking, the need to write, other needs. It was all back of him' (Hemingway, 1986, p. 134). As I will return to below, I see the river in this short story as serving as the place for Nick to find the catharsis that he needs. 'Nick was glad to get to the river' (Hemingway, 1986, p. 137).

### **Mitchell**

Frank's idea is an example of how a concern with time was prominent in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. W. J. T. Mitchell picked up on these ideas and generalised them. In 'Spatial Form: Towards a General Theory' (1980), Mitchell considers Frank's idea to be applicable to

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<sup>13</sup> 'Nick is the Hemingway hero, the first one. [...] [T]he Hemingway hero, the big, tough, outdoor man, is also the wounded man, and descriptions of certain scenes in the life of Nick Adams have explained how he got that way' (Weeks, 1962, p. 111).

literature of all types and not only to modernist texts.<sup>14</sup> But, significant in Mitchell's essay, is that he emphasizes the importance of temporality and spatiality being so interconnected that one cannot express the one without the imagery of the other.<sup>15</sup> Also, unlike Frank, Mitchell suggests that several levels and versions of spatial form exist, and he describes how versions of spatial form can be 'mapped out'. He emphasises the importance of *spatiality* not being the antithesis to *temporality* – the one is dependent on the other, and we should treat their relationship as a complex interaction. To illustrate his views, he opposes a contrasting of the terms 'linear' and 'spatial'. He sees linear structure to be a *version* of spatial form and as a contrast to a linear spatial form he proposes instead the term 'tectonic'. To visualise the distinction between linear and tectonic, Mitchell compares images of two gardens, the first 'laid out like a linear, a symmetrical, serpentine structure, the second designed as a symmetrical grid' (Mitchell, 1980, p. 560). Neither of these two versions of spatial form is more or less temporal or spatial than the other, rather they differ in structural *shape*.

### **Application of theory**

The terms concerning distinction in shape which Mitchell proposes, can be fruitfully applied to the 'chronotopic realm'. Place, space, and time are all involved in the structuring of a text. They 'collaborate' in this structuring, and also there is a tendency that some 'versions' of the three elements are likely to appear together. As Bakhtin pointed out, texts and their chronotopes are 'x-rays' of the time in which they are written. Smethurst sees chronotopic *shape* to be what links the general postmodern to the postmodern novel. Bakhtin sees time to be the most prominent category in literary chronotopes, whereas Smethurst recognises a tendency in the postmodern to emphasise the spatial. Smethurst points to the time-focused

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<sup>14</sup> 'I propose, therefore, that far from being a unique phenomenon of some modern literature, and far from being restricted to the features which Frank identifies in those works (simultaneity and discontinuity), spatial form is a crucial aspect of the experience and interpretation of literature in all ages and cultures' (Mitchell, 1980, p. 559).

<sup>15</sup> 'We cannot experience a spatial form except in time; we cannot talk about our temporal experience without invoking spatial measures' (Mitchell, 1980, p. 544).

ideas of Bakhtin and Frank to be 'linear' and his own to be more 'spatial'. This distinction is exactly what W. J. T. Mitchell opposes, because, as he notes, linearity is also a spatial form.

While Mitchell focuses chiefly on text, his terms 'linear' and 'tectonic' can also be applied to considerations like Bakhtin's and Smethurst's involving cultural influences and 'images of man'. I will therefore use Mitchell's terms, not only as different versions of spatial form in the texts, but also to characterise the *shape* of chronotopes. Bakhtin and Smethurst both emphasise the interrelatedness of time and space in the Chronotope. Nonetheless, both of them give more emphasis on the *one* of the categories. This thesis is concerned with both categories in both novels and recognise a tendency in that a linear spatial form matches well with 'traditional', directional, and chronological time and with portrayals of 'traditional', strong-spirited individuals; and a tectonic spatial form possesses a less future-oriented time view influenced by chaos theory and a non-linear, non-chronological portrayal of history prominent in postmodern literature and portrayals of the human subject influenced by these same cultural and scientific currents. Thus, I chose to illustrate tendencies in chronotopic structure or form occurring in my material by help of Mitchell's vocabulary of 'linear' and 'tectonic', and as will be highlighted in relation to the core texts, linear and tectonic chronotopic shape is linked with realism and postmodernism respectively. My belief is, then, that the river chronotope can contain both.

### ***The River Chronotope***

#### **Bakhtin's Chronotopes of the Road and the Threshold**

The river shares important traits with some of the Bakhtin's chronotopic motifs but is also different in ways, which is why an examination of the River Chronotope is of interest.

Concerning the chronotope of the *road* Bakhtin writes that it 'is both a point of new

departures and a place for events to find their denouement. Time, as it were, fuses together with space and flows in it (forming the road)' (Bakhtin, 1981, pp. 243-244). Many of the qualities that Bakhtin mentions about the road can also be said about a river and he even uses the 'vocabulary' of the river when describing the 'flowing' of fused time and space in the road chronotope. He goes on to state that it is crucial that 'the road is always one that passes through *familiar territory*, and not through some exotic *alien world* [...]' (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 245). Also, the road is a place for new departures and fulfilment of events which can certainly also be said about the river, and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* discussed in Chapter 2 is a classic example. Still, there are important differences between the road and the river.

A crucial difference is that the road is cultural and man-made and, thus, the territory it runs through becomes *familiar*, whereas the river is original and natural, and the territory along it is initially unknown to humans. Even though Bakhtin sees that the road may run through a 'social exotic' world (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 245), I see the river as a more diverse image; by being natural and independent of human construction it may and does run through both familiar and alien territory. In addition to containing many of the qualities of a road, the river has physical depth, natural force and direction – it is *independent* compared to the road and in William Wordsworth's words; 'The river glideth at his own sweet will' (Hutchinson, 1917, p. 269).<sup>16</sup>

Another of Bakhtin's chronotopes is highly relevant in relation to a discussion about the river: the threshold. Bakhtin treats it in a metaphorical way and it 'is connected with the breaking point of a life, the moment of crisis, the decision that changes a life (or the indecisiveness that fails to change a life, the fear to step over the threshold)' (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 248). Time in the chronotope of the threshold is of a different kind than what has been mentioned before; 'In

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<sup>16</sup> From William Wordsworth's Sonnet XXXVI: *Composed Upon Westminster Bridge*.

this chronotope, time is essentially instantaneous; it is as if it has no duration and falls out of the normal course of biographical time' (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 248).

The river can serve as a threshold in several respects, and is thus an idea that is naturally *included* in the River Chronotope. Its character as a 'unity of opposites', as mentioned above, makes possible a simultaneous projection of contradicting ideas and the instant transition from the one to the other. A literary example of this aspect of the river can be found in Flannery O'Connor's short story 'The River' where a metaphysical paradox is expressed physically. O'Connor treats the 'paradox' of life and death in Christian faith,<sup>17</sup> and in the river not only time and space, but also the symbolic and the physical aspects merge: A confused young boy feels a sense of belonging and value for the first time after having been baptised. When he wants to experience that feeling again he goes to the river alone:

'He intended not to fool with preachers any more but to Baptize himself and to keep on going this time until he found the Kingdom of Christ in the river. He didn't mean to waste any more time. He put his head under the water at once and pushed forward.

[...] The river wouldn't have him. He tried again and came up, choking. This was the way it had been when the preacher held him under – he had had to fight with something that pushed him back in the face. [...] He plunged under once and this time, the waiting current caught him like a long gentle hand and pulled him swiftly forward and down' (O'Connor, 2001, pp. 51-52).

In an attempt to belong and to reach 'the Kingdom of Christ in the river' the child drowns. In O'Connor's short story, one can recognise several qualities of the river simultaneously; life and death in the double respect mentioned above, and also the idea that the river itself represents the threshold between these opposites. Like the idea of a threshold denotes, it can geographically as well as ideologically 'frame in' and 'shut out', include and exclude. The transition between the 'sides' happens instantly.

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<sup>17</sup> Christ died for the sins of man in an act of grace, so that man can reach true life in heaven; one must die in order to live.

## **The River**

### **Space**

As mentioned above, the river is a place. In this thesis the term *place* refers to a geographical and physical location – a setting. *Space*, on the other hand, will be treated as the ‘effect’ of the place – i.e. the effect that the river has on people on the river and communities along its banks. The *space* of the river is twofold following the idea that the river always carries along the River Potential and that in literature certain aspects of this potential may be emphasised serving as part of the River Chronotope of a one particular text. These two spatial aspects have different relations to time; the River Potential is disconnected from historical time, whereas the River Chronotope anchors a textual river in the temporal paradigm in which the text is produced. Thus, the timeless space of the River Potential will always follow wherever the river is used in literature, but each particular literary river image will in addition represent particular space and time.

The River Potential can be seen as a basis for an almost universal social space – universal in the sense that the ideas of this *general* phenomenon are detached from concrete time and geographical location. These qualities represent a product of ‘spatial practise’, as Lefebvre calls it, based on the dialogue of human consciousness and experiences across generations, time and place. It is this independence of time and place which makes the river such an applicable image/metaphor for human issues as presented in literature. It does not cease to be relevant because it is part of a collective memory, and authors and readers are likely to share a broad spectre of associations about the river. When, in literature, some of the particular qualities of the River Potential are highlighted, the author may use it as a device to emphasise particular features in the narrative. When discussed in relation to a specific text, the highlighted features become part of this *particular* river’s chronotope, which again contributes to a structuring of the entire text.

Prudence J. Jones has noted that in old Roman texts there are referred to very close relationships between a river and those who lives near it. For instance, Hippocrates (ca. 460BC) wrote about such a relationship affecting human physiology in his *Air, Waters, Places*, and interpreting these texts Jones notes that ‘the characteristics of a local river often show particular similarities to the constitution of those to whom it supplies water. [...] For instance, those who live near marshy, stagnant waters that are hot and thick [...] in summer and cold and turbid in winter tend to have, among other things, hot, dry digestive organs [...]’ (Jones, 2005, p. 37). Naturally, since Hippocrates is considered the ‘father of medicine’<sup>18</sup> his focus was on physiology rather than literary techniques. However, his observations may still tell us something about the important influences the river can have and that the state of a river may say something about the state of the society living near it; a ‘crisp’ and clear river signals something very different from a filthy river – in society as well as in literature. Passages, from Ernest Hemingway’s ‘Big Two-Hearted River’ and Charles Dickens’ *Hard Times* may serve as contrastive examples:

‘The river was there. It swirled against the log spiles of the bridge. Nick looked down into the clear, brown water, colored from the pebbly bottom, and watched the trout keeping themselves steady in the current with wavering fins’ (Hemingway, 1986, p.133).

‘[Coketown] had a black canal in it, and a river that ran purple with ill-smelling dye, and vast piles of building full of windows where there was a rattling and a trembling all day long, and where the piston of the steam-engine worked monotonously up and down, like the head of an elephant in a state of melancholy madness’ (Dickens, 2003, p. 27).

The healing freshness of Nick Adams’ crystal clear river, literally filled with quality trout, expresses something different entirely from the filthy, ill-smelling and probably poisonous river running through Coketown. The state of the wrong-coloured river underlines an

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<sup>18</sup> C.f. Britannica Online Encyclopedia, ("Hippocrates," 2008).

impression of an unnatural and disturbed society of ‘melancholy madness’, which one can claim is the kind Dickens projects in this novel.

### **Time**

This thesis does not have as its aim to treat types of views of time and history, but rather to show how the river can represent various views and for that reason has a lasting value. It is important to keep in mind that more than one kind of time can be present in a text, and e.g. an overall chronological structure of a novel may occasionally be ‘interrupted’ by threshold-times and temporal jumps back and forth.

The natural fluency and directionality of the river makes it an accessible metaphor for the ‘flow of time’ – a fluent continuity towards the future. Such a linear and chronological view of time is well suited in societies and or paradigms that have a linear view of history – a history with a beginning and an end. Christian traditions are reliant upon such a view of history, which has had a major influence on Western mindsets. Literary Characters may be ‘designed’ to either follow or challenge the river’s directionality and future-orientation of time, resulting in different symbolic effects. *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* which is the object of Chapter 2 will enlighten a character’s following of the river *downstream*. An example of the opposite is Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*. Here, protagonist Marlow travels *upstream* the Congo River with an old steamer, and the challenging of the direction of the flow presents him with many obstacles. His dangerous upstream voyage can be read as a travel into territories physically and spiritually unknown to European Marlow and as his familiar world becomes farther and farther away one may understand it as a travel deep into an unknown part of himself and/or a regression to something original. Even though the current of the river is not always very strong, there remains little doubt about the direction of this river in this text;

‘The current was more rapid now, the steamer seamed at her last gasp, the stern-wheel flopped languidly, and I caught myself listening on the tiptoe for the next beat of the float, for in sober truth I expected the wretched thing to give up every moment. It was like watching the last flickers of a life’ (Conrad, 1996, p. 54).

Marlow and the steamer struggle upstream, indicating that they dare the ‘natural’ direction. Thus, the direction of the river may be followed or challenged, which eventually can be seen to symbolise different ideas or attitudes. One can claim that either case naturally encourages a linear chronotope although the symbolic ‘direction of time’ is future-oriented in the one and reversed in the other.

Other religions than Christianity and societies based on them can have other views of history and time. Buddhism is a religion that, compared to Christianity, has a cyclical view of life. A society rooted in Buddhism is thus more likely to hold a cyclical view of history and is more likely to also view time as something that will eventually repeat itself (C.f. Kjeldstadli, 1999, pp. 53-54). Such a cyclical view can also be represented via the river’s ‘cycles’; it is because of the continuous regeneration of little brooks after rainfall that the river doesn’t run dry. Reminding us that a dry river may signal the end of something – the cycle is broken.

Albert Einstein’s view of time as relative to space influenced Bakhtin who was so intrigued by Einstein’s ideas that he converted the term Chronotope into literary studies in his ‘Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel’ (C.f. Bakhtin, 1981, p. 84). By way of contrast, Paul Smethurst comments in his ideas about the Postmodern Chronotope, that ‘[i]n the postmodern, scientific theory seems to influence social and cultural theory again, with the Big Bang theory, Chaos theory, and the possibility of non-directional (non-linear) time’ (Smethurst, 2000, p. 105). Thus, one can assume that, in addition to religious influences, the prevailing views of time and space in science, at least to some extent, influence our ways to

interpret and organise the world around us. These interpretations are likely to be reflected in literature, and a view of time as a less directional, a 'disorderly' time influenced by chaos theory, may also be expressed through the river. A focus on the contradicting forces of the river, its capricious ability to flood and destroy, and the short 'distance' between life and death, may contribute to a projection of this sort of dis-orderly time. Also, a slow or dammed-up and stagnant river in a society of rapid communication and mobility may give an impression of 'disturbed', unnatural time. The text seen in relation to the view of temporality of the world in which it was written can be interpreted as a comment, almost, on the views of time in society. As will be treated in more length in Chapter 3, the river in McCarthy's *Suttree* can be seen to represent a quite disturbed time.

### **Space and time fused**

In O'Connor's short story, mentioned above, one can note that, in addition to it being a physical and metaphysical threshold of instantaneous time, the contradictory aspect of the river parallels the state of the boy who drowns. He is young and confused and drowns in an attempt to 'live'. The river emphasises an aspect of the story as non-directional. The contradictory qualities of the river, the state of the boy, and the social space surrounding him metaphorically 'pull' an interpretation of this text in several directions. The focus on the Christian baptism and paradox makes an instant threshold-time prominent along with imagery and concerns detached from an anchoring in historical time. The focus of the story is not on *when* the accident happens, but rather on the fact that a child dies in an attempt to belong. The themes of religion and death of a child are themes that naturally stir human feelings, so a social space concerning these themes will probably not be altered much at different points in time. However, the emphasis of certain aspects does not necessarily *exclude* the presence of other aspects, they may coexist. In O'Connor's story we realise that the river flows in one direction and is in this respect directional, only this aspect of this particular river is

subordinate the other concerns. Thus, the spatial and temporal aspects highlighted in this story can both be seen as non-directional, and a *tectonic* chronotopical structure reveals itself.

The fishing trip of Hemingway's hero, Nick Adams, referred to above can be seen to contain several important temporal aspects, and their fusing with a 'wounded' social space results in a multi-layered story. Nick has been wounded in war and is in 'disequilibrium' with his world. He retreats from the spinning world of war and walks *upstream*, challenging the natural direction of the river and temporal flow, to find a good place to camp by the river. Focusing on minute details Nick's takes focus away from the outside world and creates for himself a nearly timeless 'bubble' in which he may regain his balance. Walking upstream, Nick leaves the world behind. On his way he even leaves behind a burnt-down town and the traces of a major fire, which can be understood as a symbol of the war he has also left behind. Nick is mentally in need of catharsis and is drawn to the river in his attempt to find it; 'He washed his hands at the stream. He was excited to be near it' (Hemingway, 1986, p. 146). A physical washing of hands in a clean, 'healthy' river can be read as a metaphysical cleansing and riddance of the past. The excitement from the fishing triggers Nick's nerves but the river calms him back down; the disappointment from losing a really big trout makes him

'vaguely, a little sick, as though it would be better to sit down. [...] He sat on the logs, smoking, drying in the sun, the sun warm on his back, the river shallow ahead, entering the woods, curving into the woods, shallows, light glittering, big water-smooth rocks, cedars along the bank and white birches, the logs warm in the sun, smooth to sit on, without bark, gray to the touch; slowly the feeling of disappointment left him. It went away slowly, the feeling of disappointment that came sharply after the thrill that made his shoulders ache. It was all right now' (Hemingway, 1986, pp. 150-151).

Nick looks to the river, the details in and around it, to calm back down after the tension.

Perhaps Henry David Thoreau's description of a fisherman in *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* sketches something similar to Nick's experience by the river: 'His fishing

was not a sport, nor solely a means of subsistence, but a sort of solemn sacrament and withdrawal from the world, just as the aged read their Bibles' (Thoreau, 2006, p. 14).

Nick's river is a place of purification and healing, and the upstream journey represents a retreat from flow of time and the progress of the world outside his 'bubble'. In a complete wilderness, whether mental or material, a river may constitute order and access – although the total River Potential also includes the possibility for dis-order. Thus, Nick's walking against the river and using it as a place to regain balance opens up for an interpretation of the river as a spatial image of the stopping of the constant flow of time – a time-out from the 'wilderness' of a civilization in war – but also as a kind of threshold, as it serves as a place for transition between states of mind. One can claim that this story has elements pointing in the direction of both linear and tectonic form, and perhaps a tectonic 'comment' on something linear – a time-out from progress.

### ***Concluding remarks***

As shown above, the River Chronotope is a fusing of time and space in a particular literary river image. The richness of the River Chronotope is informed and coloured by our more general knowledge and associations of the qualities of the river in the River Potential.

Because of the river's joint physical and metaphysical qualities, the river as literary device can support and amplify quite different spatio-temporal 'constellations' as well as literary characters in different situations and states.

In the following two chapters two very different realisations of the River Chronotope will be examined. In the process I will be pointing to what makes them so different and how they both can be read as comments on their respective societies.

*'It was kind of solemn, drifting down the river, laying on our backs looking up at the stars, and we didn't ever feel like talking loud'* <sup>19</sup>

## **Chapter 2:**

### ***The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn (1884)***

In his introduction to a 1950 publication of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, T. S. Eliot emphasises two elements of the novel that make it a great one: 'these two are the Boy and the River' (Cooley, 1999, p. 348). Eliot comments further that '[i]t is Huck who gives the book style. The River gives the book its form' (Cooley, 1999, p. 351). Huck and the river can actually be seen as so closely related that it can be appropriate to give both boy and flood credit for styling and forming of this novel. As I will return to, the novel's protagonist, Huckleberry Finn, can be seen as the typical free spirited American man and his character resembles the strong and free flowing Mississippi River that he drifts upon – both having a linear chronotopical structure.

#### ***Realist America***

The social scene in the US at the time Mark Twain wrote *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* was heavily influenced by the American Civil War (1861-1865) and the issues leading up to it, eventually constituting a watershed in American history and culture (C.f. Ro, 1997, p. 127). Racial issues, industrialisation and urbanisation are only a few central issues of this age reflected in literature and culture in various ways. 'Realism' is the label put on a mode of dealing with these themes and thoughts of which central traits were a focus on regionalism and local character, distinctiveness and diversity of rural America. Another focus of the typical realist literary approach was to give a realistic description of society, whether or not ironic or satirical, and to mediate how things *really* were instead of how they *should* be.

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<sup>19</sup> (Twain, 1994, p. 70)

Twain's novel published in 1884, but set in the pre-Civil War years, can be seen as a typical example of a realist novel. The story is linear and chronological in form, much like the form of the river as Eliot commented, although the plot takes several detours along the way. In addition to being an adventurous travel story, the novel has a satirical approach to the issues of slavery, human frailty and the realities of life that is difficult to overlook. Twain uses satire to ridicule conventional rules of society.

Mark Twain, or Samuel Langhorne Clemens (1835-1910) which was his real name, grew up by the Mississippi River in Hannibal, Missouri. Fascinated by the river and the steamboats from childhood, he studied and worked for several years as a steamboat pilot as an adult. His detailed knowledge of and fascination with the river is reflected in several of his novels, of which *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn (AHF)* is central along with the preceding *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer (ATS)* and *Life on the Mississippi (LM)*. As Shelley Fisher Fishkin notes; 'Twain learned to master the art of unconscious absorption on the river and later transferred that art to the printed page. Genius aside, his works are remarkable windows on his world, as a result' (Fishkin, 2002, p. 5). This absorption of the river is evident in Twain's expressing a very close relationship between Huck and his Mississippi River.

## ***The River Chronotope in The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn***

Bakhtin's emphasis on the temporal element in the literary chronotope is well suited to capture realist concerns with progress, urbanisation and communication. Also, the type of character that Bakhtin refers to as the '*internal man* – [of] pure "natural" subjectivity' (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 164) has resemblance to the character of Huckleberry Finn. This 'internal man' can typically be found in picaresque novels, which, Bakhtin links to 'the chronotope of the everyday-adventure novel- by means of a road that winds through one's native territory' (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 165). Huck's picaro-traits and the importance and linearity of the river have made scholars relate it to the 'road genre'.<sup>20</sup> The novel can for the same reasons be connected to Bakhtin's idea of the road chronotope. Bakhtin writes of the road chronotope that

'On the road ("the high road"), the spatial and temporal paths of the most varied people – representatives of all social classes, estates, religions, nationalities, ages – intersect at one spatial and temporal point. People who are normally kept separate by social and spatial distance can accidentally meet' (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 243).

In this manner the chronotope of the road fits well to Huck and Jim's river journey; they certainly meet people of different class and character, and they themselves represent some of these variables that Bakhtin lists. Also, the journey can indeed in many ways be read as a metaphorical 'road trip' and shares several characteristics with typical 'road novels': the theme of development, the direction of the journey, physical and spiritual movement leaving the 'old world' behind, and playing on typical American myths and symbols like the 'new' American man.

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<sup>20</sup> Lionel Trilling noted this in his 1948 introduction to *AHF*: 'The form of the book is based on the simplest of all novel-forms, the so-called picaresque novel, or novel of the road, which strings its incidents on the line of the hero's travels (Trilling, 1948, web page). Also, Brian Ireland counts *AHF* as a kind of 'road genre' in his 'American Highways: Recurring Images and Themes of the Road Genre' (C.f. Ireland, 2003, p. 477). Bryce M. Cundick connects the middle part of *AHF* to Bakhtin's chronotope of the road (C.f. Cundick, 2005, p. 74).

Still, this story has a depth that I consider the road unable to reflect – a depth which can be better captured via the River Chronotope. What the road cannot capture is the river’s duality, the unity of opposites – a trait that connects the River Potential to the human being. The two elements, river and boy, are actually so closely knit together that they will, here, be treated alternately.

The novel can be divided into three different parts; the first, in St. Petersburg area before Huck ‘kills himself’; the second, the river journey; and the third, the rather long ending involving the freeing of Jim. The river’s function is most obvious in the second part but is vital in the first and third part also because it serves as the linear flow binding the whole story together. It resembles Huck’s character and thus ‘follows’ wherever he goes. Together river and boy give form and style to the story and the continuity of the river and Huck’s character both connect the otherwise unrelated places and scenes that happen along the journey.

Huck’s plan to run away from his abusive father really takes form as the river starts rising. As he declares ‘The June rise used to be always luck for me’ (Twain, 1994, p. 38). This turns out to be true. As if having a consciousness of its own the river brings along among the flotsam a canoe adrift, soon to serve as Huck’s means for escape. While Pap is away on the other side of the river, Huck stages his own murder and gets away.

‘I didn’t lose no time. The next minute I was a-spinning down-stream soft but quick in the shade of the bank. I made two mile and a half, and then struck out a quarter of a mile or more towards the middle of the river, because pretty soon I would be passing the ferry landing and people might see me and hail me. I got out amongst the drift-wood and then laid down in the bottom of the canoe and let her float’ (Twain, 1994, p. 42).

Father and son being on different sides of it, the river initially serves as a physical boundary between them, allowing Huck to free himself from the cabin in which he is kept when Pap is away. The distance from one side of the river to the other gives Huck the time to stage his

murder before ultimately the current makes it possible for him to escape, drifting downstream. The interaction between boy and river is very close; as Jim expresses when he first sees what he believes to be Huck's ghost on Jackson Island: 'You go en git in de river agin, whah you b'longs' (Twain, 1994, p. 48). Huck belongs on/in the river – dead or alive. He knows it very well and by positioning himself on it he uses its differing tempo and currents like only a knower could. The current is swift and strong in the middle and calmer along the river banks. During the flow the river brings along handy bits and pieces and as Huck runs away this flotsam provides a hiding for him and the canoe.

The river, like Huck, develops and changes along the southward journey, and is occasionally 'interrupted' by civilization. Steamboats travel up and down the river challenging its natural currents, but sometimes the river 'takes back', suggesting the duality of the river and its capability to interrupt civilization. Huck and Jim come across 'a steamboat that had killed herself on a rock' (Twain, 1994, p. 71), and also pass many towns of which one is dangerously threatened by the river: 'Such a town as that has to be always moving back, and back, and back, because the river's always gnawing at it' (Twain, 1994, p. 141).

Like the river, Huck and Jim are also 'interrupted' by civilization. They meet strange people and are at one point run over by a steamboat. The raft is their little 'Eden', they are even naked as they float along,<sup>21</sup> suggesting its timeless relevance as part of the River Potential, but their paradise is constantly interrupted – by civilization as mentioned, but also by nature itself. During a dense fog and bad weather Huck and Jim lose each other (Huck in the canoe and Jim on the raft) and both drift past the little town of Cairo at the entrance of the Ohio River and with it Jim's hope to reach freedom in the Northern States.

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<sup>21</sup> '[W]e was always naked, day and night' (Twain, 1994, p. 120), 'The waves most washed me off the raft, sometimes, but I hadn't any clothes on, and didn't mind' (Twain, 1994, p. 129).

The fog, in the situation just mentioned, can be regarded as nearly an ‘extension’ of the river. Together the fog and the river overpower Huck, and after having fought for a long time and trying to catch up with Jim on the raft, Huck gives up; ‘I reckoned Jim had fetched up on a snag, maybe, and it was all up with him. I was good and tired, so I laid down in the canoe and said I wouldn’t bother no more’ (Twain, 1994, p. 87). Having been asleep for a while, the conditions are very different as he wakes up. The fog is gone, it is a clear, starlit night, and the river and the banks look different: ‘It was a monstrous big river here, with the tallest and the thickest kind of timber on both banks; just a solid wall, as well as I could see, by the stars’ (Twain, 1994, p. 87). Quite soon Huck also spots the raft, Jim onboard, in the distance; the river has brought them back together.

The changes in the weather and the condition of the river and the banks also indicate a change in Huck’s situation. Shortly after the physical fog has lifted, and Huck and Jim are back together on the raft, a ‘mental fog’ lowers on Huck. As he realises that they are close to Cairo and Jim’s freedom, Huck’s conscience begins to work in him. He thinks about what people would say if they knew that he is responsible for Jim’s getting away, which at the time was to be considered a serious crime. This is a situation where it becomes clear that Huck is not completely freed of society’s conventions; he is not wholly the ‘inner man’ of Bakhtin’s. Actually, he is sufficiently coloured by these conventions to initially plan to turn Jim in when setting out to ask someone how far they have come downstream. But as it turns out, what is equally clear is that a betrayal of Jim, who completely trusts Huck,<sup>22</sup> is unnatural for him to such an extent that he feels sick. Like the fog that cleared just before, Huck decides at the last

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<sup>22</sup> ‘Pooty soon I’ll be a-shout’n for joy, en I’ll say, it’s all on accounts o’ Huck; I’s a free man, en I couldn’t ever ben free ef it hadn’ been 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. [...] Dah you goes, de ole true Huck; de on’y white genlman dat ever kep’ his promise to ole Jim’ (Twain, 1994, pp. 92-93).

minute not to tell on Jim. Eventually, they both realise that they must have passed Cairo that foggy night – a fact that in daylight becomes quite clear, and evident in the river itself; ‘here was the clear Ohio water in shore, sure enough, and outside was the old regular Muddy! So it was all up with Cairo’ (Twain, 1994, p. 96). They are south of the joining of the rivers.

In addition to the description of the Ohio and Mississippi water as clear and muddy, respectively, there is frequent mention of the river’s tempo and qualities and Huck’s positioning on it:

‘He dropped below me, with the current, and by-and-by he come a-swinging up-shore in the easy water [...]. I didn’t loose no time. The next minute I was a-spinning downstream soft but quick in the shade of the bank. I made two miles and a half, and then struck out a quarter of a mile or more towards the middle of the river’ (Twain, 1994, p. 42);

‘I shot past the head at a ripping rate, the current was so swift, and then I got into the dead water’ (Twain, 1994, p. 43);

‘I paddled over to the Illinois shore, and drifted down most half a mile doing it. I crept up the dead water under the bank [...].’ (Twain, 1994, pp. 57-58);

‘the drift of the current fetched me in at the bottom of the town’ (Twain, 1994, p. 60).

‘the current throwed me off to the left and shot by, amongst a lot of snags that fairly roared, the current was tearing by them so swift’ (Twain, 1994, p. 86);

‘don’t you lose no time, Jim, but just shove off for the big water as fast as ever you can’ (Twain, 1994, p. 118);

These strong current strengthen the feeling of temporal flow and directionality of the story, and Huck’s positioning in the strong current in the middle or ‘dead water’ along the bank shows how familiar he is with it. The descriptions of the changing colour of the river and the different river banks are other examples that contribute to this feeling of development and southward movement; the trees on the banks are different south of Cairo and the joining of the Mississippi and the Ohio rivers suggests a directional development.

The examples also illustrate how ‘time takes on flesh’ and how ‘space becomes charged’ (C.f. Bakhtin, 1981, p. 84); Time is shown via description of changing conditions of nature, the direction and swiftness of the river in particular, and these descriptions of the physical river and the effect it has on Huck’s are ‘charged’ with temporality and direction as they drift along.

In addition to Huck’s descriptions of the river and their journey, the geographical movement from north to south is symbolically significant and is traditionally ‘charged’ in literature and film as well as historically in the United States. Following this, one can also find that Huck’s inner state is affected and develops as they drift southwards. As Brian Ireland writes in his article about the ‘Road Genre’ in American film and literature,<sup>23</sup> there is a reflection of history in the direction of the journey. He writes that

‘[w]hile “The North,” “The South,” “The East,” and “The West” are geographically hard to pin down, as symbols they can be associated generally with the following ideas: the East, New England, is that part of America geographically and culturally closest to Europe; The South is traditionally and historically associated with slavery and the civil rights movement; The North is associated with freedom from slavery, and South-North movement is an important current in African American history and culture; and The West is associated with images of the frontier and the idea of freedom’ (Ireland, 2003, p. 475)

In *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* it is important that Huck and Jim’s plan was initially to follow the Mississippi southward only till Cairo and from there go northward on the Ohio where Jim would be free (C.f. Twain, 1994, p. 84). It is just after the sketching of this plan that the dense fog comes along, separates the two, and eventually makes them pass Cairo. The place where the two rivers join together serves as a ‘twilight zone’ and/or threshold in several ways; it serves as a physical marker of the threshold between freedom and continuous flight for Jim, and also, it is the place where fog comes along and blurs Huck’s ‘natural sight’ if

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<sup>23</sup> Ireland considers *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* to be included in this genre where a ‘physical and spiritual movement’ goes hand in hand (Ireland, 2003, p. 475).

only for a while. South of Cairo, clear and muddy water flows together hinting towards the bizarre situations in which the duo will soon find themselves. These bizarre incidents contribute to a clarification of Huck's character as he shows his attitudes, and the fact that he in the end plans to leave for the 'Injun Territory' suggests a further pursuit of freedom in The West.

Almost like a reminder of civilization's 'interruption' of nature, one night, shortly after Cairo, Huck and Jim are run over by a steamer coming upstream. Their natural downstream drift is interrupted by the steamer's modern, mechanical defying of the natural flow of the river. 'Of course there was a booming current; and of course that boat started her engines again ten seconds after she stopped them, for they never cared much for raftsmen' (Twain, 1994, p. 98). Jim and Huck are again separated; this time by the machines of civilisation as opposed to earlier by nature herself – the fog.

Believing that Jim has not survived their collision with the steamer, Huck crawls ashore and ends up in the middle of the Grangerford – Sheperdson feud; A senseless feud between two aristocratic families. Huck gets along very well with young Buck Grangerford. After a shooting between the two rivalling families Huck finds Buck killed. Buck lays halfway into the river and as Huck pulls his friend ashore and covers up his face he cries. One can sense a connection between the very real situation of Buck's death and Huck's own staged death back up in St. Petersburg and one can possibly see Buck as an aristocratic 'version' of Huck. The river is present in both cases and its quality of being a unity of opposites underlines a bond between the two boys: Buck and Huck, rich and poor, dead and alive.

Huck and Jim are back together, again free and safe when well downriver from the feud. Back on the raft they appreciate the comfort and freedom of their home onboard; 'I was powerful glad to get away from the feuds, and so was Jim to get away from the swamp. We said there warn't no home like a raft, after all. Other places do seem so cramped up and smothery, but a raft don't. You feel mighty free and easy and comfortable on a raft' (Twain, 1994, p. 118).

After having missed Cairo and Jim's prospects of freedom, and also having escaped the feud in which Huck loses his friend Buck, it seems as if they really focus and 'inhale' their freedom on the raft. In Huck's descriptions one can detect a 'charging' of the river as a place for freedom. He describes how time 'swims by' and how idyllic their days are, and Huck uses the 'vocabulary' of the river when describing their rhythm of travel and rest;

'Two or three days and nights went by; I reckon I might say they swum by, they slid along so quiet and smooth and lovely. [...] 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; [...] 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, [...]. The first thing to see, looking away over the water, was a kind of dull line – that was the woods on t'other side – you couldn't make nothing else out; then a pale place in the sky; then more paleness, spreading around; then the river softened up, away off, and warn't black any more, but grey; you could see little dark spots drifting along, ever so far away – trading-scows, and such things; and long black streaks – rafts; [...] and by-and-by you could see a streak on the water which you know by the look of the streak that there's a snag there in a swift current which breaks on it and makes that streak look that way; and you see the mist curl up off of the water, and the east reddens up, and the river[...] And afterwards we could watch the lonesomeness of the river, and kind of lazy along, and by-and-by lazy off to sleep (Twain, 1994, pp. 118-119).

Huck describes the flowing of time by reporting the details of nature, life on and by the river, and of the river itself. Simultaneously, the close relationship between river and men is revealed: The days 'swum by' and 'slid along', Huck and Jim 'slid into the river and had a swim'; they sit *in* the river watching the daylight come and the east and the river both 'redden up'; the river 'lazy along' as Huck and Jim 'lazy off to sleep'. Huck finds comfort in watching

the river, being near it, and being on it. He describes the 'lonesomeness of the river' like he has described himself a little earlier, before meeting Jim on Jackson Island: 'When it was dark I set by my camp-fire smoking, and feeling pretty satisfied; but by-and-by it got sort of lonesome, and so I went and set on the bank and listened to the currents washing along, and counted the stars and drift-logs and rafts that come down' (Twain, 1994, p. 46). Time, river, and the two friends are parts of the same 'register' and are expressed in the same vocabulary.

However, like harmony in the Garden of Eden abruptly came to an end, harmony on the raft is also interrupted; this time not by nature nor by machine, but by representatives of 'society', the peculiar characters 'the King' and 'the Duke'. Only shortly after Huck's description of his and Jim's little Eden on and by the river, they become accompanied on the raft by these two rogues who 'stir up' the harmonious days referred to above with their swindles and deceits in several towns down the river. Although Huck on occasions can be seen as a bit of a liar and a rascal himself,<sup>24</sup> when compared to the King and the Duke, he serves as an example of good morals and as having compassion with other people. Whereas the King and Duke are always after more money, for Huck money is no object.<sup>25</sup> The King and the Duke join Huck and Jim for the rest of their journey until they, behind Huck's back, sell Jim. Along the journey downriver the swindles get gradually worse and even before their deceit towards Jim it amounts to such cruel frauds that Huck is ashamed<sup>26</sup> and eventually wants to get rid of them. The comparison to these two frauds, serves as an exposition of Huck as a good-natured person; although in favour of adventures, Huck has no desire to do harm to the people he meets.

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<sup>24</sup> E.g. his philosophy of 'borrowing' (C.f. Twain, 1994, p. 70).

<sup>25</sup> In the very beginning of the novel he even gives away all his money in a hope not to be bothered by Pap Finn (C.f. Twain, 1994, p. 25).

<sup>26</sup> 'It was enough to make a body ashamed of the human race' (Twain, 1994, p. 161).

After the King and the Duke come along, the raft, the former Eden, becomes a polarised place. The raft serves more and more as a means to run from one scandal to another. When Huck decides to leave the royalties behind in their own trouble after the Wilks funeral, he and Jim believe for a few minutes that they are rid of them and once again free; ‘away we went, a-sliding down the river, and *did* it seem so good to be free again and all by ourselves on the big river and nobody to bother us’ (Twain, 1994, p. 200). But, the King and the Duke catch up with them, and the freedom does not last.

Further downstream they tie up again and the King and the Duke again show their cruelty by selling Jim.<sup>27</sup> Huck decides he cannot leave Jim behind and his travel downstream stops at the Phelps’ farm where Jim is held captive. Before he famously decides to spite conventions and rescue Jim – ‘All right, then, I’ll *go* to Hell’ (Twain, 1994, p. 208) – Huck thinks about their good times, and again the river is central:

‘[I] got to thinking over our trip down the river; and I see Jim before me, all the time, in the day, and in the night-time, sometimes moonlight, sometimes storms, and we a-floating along, talking, and singing, and laughing’ (Twain, 1994, p. 208).

The good times on the raft ‘a-floating along’ with Jim are more important than society’s acceptance and Huck decides to save his friend. The rest of the novel concerns the rescue of Jim with the adventurous ‘help’ of Tom Sawyer, and thus, the downstream movement stops here.

The ending of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* has been the object for much debate. The reappearance of Tom Sawyer and his taking over command in the freeing of Jim has been

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<sup>27</sup> ‘After all this long journey, and after all we’d done for them scoundrels, here was it all come to nothing, everything busted up and ruined, because they could have the heart to serve Jim such a trick as that, and make him a slave again all his life, and amongst strangers, too, for forty dirty dollars’ (Twain, 1994, p. 206).

seen, by among others Lionel Trilling, as the only flaw of this novel.<sup>28</sup> The full debate is not of major interest to this thesis, and I choose to read the ending as an elaborate rounding off of a story whose genius lies in its portrayal of the river journey.

### **American Adam**

One key to the close relation between the river and Huck is the tie between the river's directionality and Huck as a strong-willed and future-oriented, much like the kind of individual Bakhtin calls the '*internal man* – [of] pure "natural" subjectivity' (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 164), as mentioned above. Huck's character, one can claim, is natural and hardly shaped by society at all, and Jay Martin even calls Huck 'the noble savage' (Martin, 1967, p. 187).

*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is, as Twain himself noted, the 'autobiography' of young Huck.<sup>29</sup> The 1<sup>st</sup> person narrative alone indicates a strong protagonist – this is Huck's story. By running away from his father and from the widow Douglas, Huck cuts loose from his past. By staging his own murder he can start a new life; Huck has 'died' and is free to start anew. His following the 'river of life', suggests a hint towards the Christian idea of death before new life, and also to physical aspects of the River Potential: the river as a boundary. Huck saves his natural self from being 'corrupted' by the widow, by his own father, and ultimately from society – he saves himself from 'spiritual death'. His running away and making everyone believe that he has been murdered can be seen as a threshold-moment. It is a moment of crisis for Huck, and his life is dramatically altered afterwards. The river serves as threshold in one real and one staged way; in the real manner, it is the border between captivity and freedom and serves as the physical reality that enables Huck to run quickly enough away not to be

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<sup>28</sup> 'Only one mistake has ever been charged against it, that it concludes with Tom Sawyer's elaborate, too elaborate, game of Jim's escape. Certainly this episode is too long--in the original draft it was much longer--and certainly it is a falling off, as almost anything would have to be, from the incidents of the river' (Trilling, 1948, web page).

<sup>29</sup> In a letter to W. D. Howells in 1876 Mark Twain writes that he has come half way in 'Huck Finn's Autobiography' (Cooley, 1999, p. 299).

discovered, and also it serves as a metaphorical boundary between life and death making possible a 'new start'.

Although Bakhtin links his idea of the 'internal man' to the picaro, the nature of Huck can also be seen as to represent what has been referred to as the 'American Adam', a strong-spirited 'new' man. R. W. B. Lewis writes: 'Adam was the first, the archetypal, man. His moral position was prior to experience, and in his newness he was fundamentally innocent' (Lewis, 1955, p. 5). The American Adam, the 'new personality' fit to symbolise America's freedom from Britain and Europe was

'the image of a radically new personality, the hero of the new adventure: an individual emancipated from history, happily bereft of ancestry, untouched and undefiled by the usual inheritances of family and race; an individual standing alone, self-reliant and self-propelling, ready to confront whatever awaiting him with the aid of his own unique and inherent resources' (Lewis, 1955, p. 5).

If one looks to Twain's own description of the boy on whom the character Huck Finn is based, Tom Blankenship, the similarities to Lewis' American Adam are striking;

'He was ignorant, unwashed, insufficiently fed; but had as good a heart as ever any boy had. His liberties were totally unrestricted. He was the only really independent person – boy or man – in the community, and by consequence he was tranquilly and continuously happy, and was envied by all the rest of us' (as quoted in Cooley, 1999, p. 301).<sup>30</sup>

The fact that Huck lacks a conventional upbringing results in his acting on his own 'reflexes' rather than the social conscience he has been taught. This makes him a contrast to many of the people he encounters on and along the river.

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<sup>30</sup> There have been major debates about the nobleness of Huck's character and about whether or not it is a novel suited for teaching in American schools. I chose not to go into this debate since I consider it to be outside of the frame for this thesis. One central discussion has been about the use of the term 'nigger' throughout the novel. E.g. Jonathan Arac criticises the idolatry of Huck and the excessive use of the word 'nigger' in his *Huckleberry Finn as Idol and Target: The Functions of Criticism in Our Time* (E.g. Arac, 1997, p. ch 1).

The social space is continuously renegotiated both onboard the raft drifting southwards and in encounters ashore. Onboard the raft the dialogue is, to begin with, between Huck and Jim. Both of them develop along their southward drift: Before he runs off from Miss Watson, Jim is primarily an extremely superstitious slave, of whom Huck and Tom Sawyer make fun. Although still superstitious in the end of the novel,<sup>31</sup> Jim has mentally as well as geographically moved a long way from his situation as a slave up north. It seems that the further south into the slave states they come, the freer of mind becomes Jim. In the end, Jim is the one risking his freedom by making the decision of getting a doctor for Tom who has been shot. Jim makes this decision *against* Tom's will, signalling Jim's freeing himself from the conventional roles (C.f. Twain, 1994, pp. 264-265). Huck's development can be seen in his being haunted by his taught conscience. Since he overcomes these situations every time by following his natural senses of friendship and justice, one can claim that his strong character is continuously reaffirmed downstream. What he learns is that his instincts are right. And, although expressed in what must today be considered a very inappropriate complement, he shows that Jim is his equal: 'I knowed he was white inside' (Twain, 1994, p. 265).

Whatever differences there are between Huck and Jim are washed away on the river and it is only in repeated encounters with society that they have to pretend having traditional roles, like when Huck is thinking about turning Jim in. Huck has no problem having Jim as his friend, but his knowledge of the conventions of society forces him to choose whether to follow his natural sense of justice or his taught conscience. Huck promises Jim, when they meet on Jackson Island, never to tell on him;

'I said I wouldn't, and I'll stick to it. Honest *injun* I will. People would call me a low-down Abolitionist and despise me for keeping mum – but that don't make no

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<sup>31</sup> 'Dah, now, Huck, what I tell you? – what I tell you up dah on Jackson islan'? I *tole* you I got a hairy breas', en what's de sign un it; en I *tole* you I ben rich wunst, en gwineter to be rich *agin*; en it's come true [...] signs is *signs*' (Twain, 1994, p. 280).

difference. I ain't agoing to tell, and I ain't agoing back there anyways' (Twain, 1994, p. 50).

Nonetheless, Huck's conscience starts haunting him as he realises how close they are to Cairo and Jim's freedom. As is well known, Huck decides to help Jim and spite society's conventions. The second, and last, time he is troubled about telling the truth about Jim or not, is at the end of the journey when Jim is held captured at the Phelps farm. The fact that he follows his natural convictions, this time for good, in spite of society's conventions contributes to an understanding of Huck as an Adamic character.

When the King and the Duke come along on the raft, the dialogue onboard is altered. Huck becomes more like Jim, one might say, letting the two rogues take over command. Still, letting the 'royalties' feel in control is a conscious act based on Huck's experience with his own father: 'If I never learnt nothing else out of pap, I learnt that the best way to get along with his kind of people is to let them have their own way' (Twain, 1994, p. 126). Through their experiences downstream Huck experiences again, like with his father, that some people can be very cruel to others. Along the journey, the gradually worse schemes of the King and the Duke work as a contrast to and enhance an image of Huck and Jim as innocent and kind.

By its natural directedness, fluency and linearity the Mississippi River structures the text and serves as an amplifier of protagonist Huck's strong spirited identity. Onboard the raft and adrift on the river is where Huck is closest to being free. It is to this that he keeps returning, and it is while being in motion on it that he expresses feelings of comfort and safety:

'Soon as it was night, out we shoved; when we got her out to about the middle, we let her alone, and let her float wherever the current wanted her to; then we lit our pipes, and dangled our legs in the water and talked about all kinds of things – we was always naked, day and night, whenever the mosquitoes would let us – [...] Sometimes we'd have that whole river all to ourselves for the longest time. Yonder was the banks and the islands, across the water; and maybe a spark – which was a candle in a cabin

window – and sometimes on the water you could see a spark or two – on a raft or a scow, you know; and maybe you could hear a fiddle or a song coming over from one of them crafts. It's lovely to live on a raft' (Twain, 1994, p. 120).

The river itself and the raft being carried along it is the closest 'Adam' comes to Eden. Thus, read symbolically and seriously challenging the author's threat at the beginning of the book,<sup>32</sup> there are traces of both of the 'original' ideas, Eden and Adam, and the two are closely related. These aspects of the river and the boy serve as part of the River Potential and can be seen as detached from specific historical time.

However, it is not all bliss, and the river is not only benevolent. It contains a symbolic as well as a physical duality and can thus be understood as 'serpent' as well as Eden. Still, Huck's experience on the river and knowledge about how to behave on it contribute to a projection of primarily the benevolent aspects of it.

### ***Shape and Conclusion***

Prudence Jones notes about Roman writers and their recognition of 'continuity and directional motion as essential qualities' of the river and that this is 'evidenced by its use as a metaphor for the passage of time' (Jones, 2005, p. 103), and she continues '[t]he river is a way of getting from the past to the present (or vice versa) and from the beginning to the end of a narrative. Once initiated, a story must have the continuity that a river represents' (Jones, 2005, p. 104). In *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* time and story are presented chronologically. Huck and Jim follow the river, leaving their past behind on their way to the future which lies somewhere ahead. Nevertheless, they initially plan to travel downstream only for a while and go upstream the Ohio River when they reach its entrance by Cairo, which would have altered the structure of the novel. Losing their track in the heavy fog the two travelling comrades miss

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<sup>32</sup> NOTICE. PERSONS attempting to find a motive in this narrative will be prosecuted; persons attempting to find a moral in it will be banished; persons attempting to find a plot in it will be shot. BY ORDER OF THE AUTHOR *per* G. G., CHIEF OF ORDNANCE (Twain, 1994, p. 5).

the entrance of the Ohio and, with it, Jim's prospect of freedom in the Northern States. Their continuing downstream travel highlights the chronology and direction of the story, a tendency further emphasised if one considers Huck and Jim's relatively rapid and efficient movement in relation to the tempo of communication in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Huck leaves us in the end with the prospect of refusing Tom Sawyer's Aunt Sally's intended adopting and 'sivilizing' because, as he says, 'I can't stand it. I been there before' (Twain, 1994, p. 281). He is once again in a situation that he wants to escape, like he was in the beginning of the novel. This may tempt critics to read it as a cyclical story. However, I see his situation altogether as being radically different. He actually has, as he says himself, been there before. He has experienced the attempts of making him conform to society, and he did not like it. Like the river, Huck has no intention of turning back. The structure of this novel is chronological and directional – a linear chronotopic shape which emphasises the nature-driven and future-oriented Huckleberry Finn.

As I mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* can be seen as a typical realist novel. It reflects the society of Twain's America but continues to appeal and provoke readers today. The combination of Huck being an archetypal Adamic character and the symbolism of the river involved can be seen as a crucial reason for the novel's lasting appeal. It reflects aspects of the human character that does not cease to engage. Huck's character resembles the river and, whether or not an 'archetypal' literary image, the river can be associated with ancient structures and symbolism representing something original. Thus, the boy and the river both represent original traits and amplify each other in the text.

*'Beyond in the dark the river flows in a sluggard ooze toward southern seas, running down out of the rainflattened corn and petty crops and riverloam gardens of upcountry landkeepers, grating along like bonedust, afreight with the past, dreams dispersed in the water someway, nothing ever lost'*<sup>33</sup>

### **Chapter 3:**

#### ***Suttree (1979)***

The previous chapter showed the river's function in a realist text. I now turn to Cormac McCarthy's novel *Suttree* which involves a step towards our own time and a leap into 'a postmodern river', so to speak. It is debatable whether or not *Suttree* as a whole is a typical 'postmodern novel'. It has earlier been classified as both a 'late modernist' novel and as an 'ecopastoral' novel,<sup>34</sup> but for the purpose of this thesis, more important than a classification of the novel as a whole is a discussion of the function of the river image involved and in what way this image emphasises the qualities of the protagonist. As I will show in the following I understand *Suttree*'s protagonist, Cornelius Suttree, to be what I refer to as a postmodern subject. The chronotopic structure of such a subject differs drastically from the 'internal' and directional individual treated in Chapter 2. Thus, to have a similarly close relationship between river and protagonist as between the Mississippi River and Huckleberry Finn, the river in this novel must be highlighted in radically different ways.

*Suttree* is Cormac McCarthy's fourth novel and was written over a time span of approximately 20 years. It was published in 1979 and takes place in Knoxville, the city in which the author himself grew up and lived for many years. The novel is set to the early

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<sup>33</sup> McCarthy, p. 4

<sup>34</sup> David Holloway sees *Suttree* as a 'late modernist' novel and Suttree as a 'Sartrean project' (Holloway, 2002, p. 114), and Georg Guillemin sees *Suttree* as an ecopastoral novel in *The Pastoral Vision of Cormac McCarthy* (Guillemin, 2004, p. 15).

1950's, and whether or not autobiographical, its descriptions of the milieu of Knoxville's 'dark side' definitely seem written by someone familiar with the place, the time, and the social space involved.

### ***1950s America***

To give a thorough account for the social scene in the world when *Suttree* was written would obviously be a complex task, seeing as the novel was written in the course of 20 years. The scene when it was published was a different one entirely from when it was started, and McCarthy himself had naturally gone through changes. This might be one reason why it may be difficult to pin this novel down into one literary 'epoch'. Still, and more importantly, an indication of aspects of the age in which *Suttree* was written in relation to the age of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is very much possible. Of major importance in this respect, are the tremendous changes in communications and mobility. Compared to Twain's days, the world of the 1950's and 1960's was considerably 'smaller', i.e. the access to and speed of transportation and communication made it possible for people to visit and stay in touch with friends and relatives far away to a much greater extent than earlier. This again allowed for cultural horizons very different from earlier times. New experiences and views of speed and distance, time, space and science laid new premises for people's understanding of the world – the world was to be understood via a 'new' chronotope.

According to Paul Smethurst, some of the elements influencing the 'postmodern chronotope' include new 'trends' in science, now influenced by chaos theory as opposed to Einstein's theories earlier, and a different emphasis on 'spatial issues', following what Smethurst calls the 'spatial turn in philosophy' referred to in Chapter 1. Thus, to use Bakhtin's idea, it is likely that time in *Suttree*'s postmodern world 'takes on flesh' in a different way than in Huck's realist world, and that 'space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of

time, plot and history' in a different manner (C.f. Bakhtin, 1981, p. 84). Bakhtin emphasizes that artistic expressions say something about the world in which they are created and that the relationship between art and reality is 'defined by its chronotope' (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 243). The real world in which Twain and McCarthy's novels were written looked quite different and, thus, artistic expressions will, following Bakhtin's idea, be different. The relationship between art and reality stays the same, but the differences between literary periods will be visible through the development and structure of the literary chronotopes. Thus, having detected a realist and linear 'mentality' and River Chronotope in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, one can expect to find a different structure dominant in *Suttree*, which is, like Twain's novel, 'marked' by its own time.

The elements contributing to a 'shaping' of the postmodern chronotope can be seen as less directional than the 'realist chronotope'<sup>35</sup> of Twain's age. Like Smethurst points to, Chaos theory, Big-Bang theory and the Uncertainty Principle underlies the theory of space-time relations in and from the twentieth century (C.f. Smethurst, 2000, pp. 105-106). These theories influence how we see the world and, furthermore, influence artistic expressions like literature. The common tendency is non-linear structures, a tendency which the postmodern subject also follows. Timothy Melley recognises in the postmodern narrative "'fragmented" or "decentred" concepts of subjectivity,' that are 'constructed from without, repeatedly reshaped through performance, and (in extreme accounts) best understood as a schizophrenic and anchorless array of separate components' (Melley, 2000, p. 15). The theme of subjective decentred-ness or hollowness is thus a central one in postmodern literature. These non-linear and 'decentred' ideas are dominant in my idea of a tectonic chronotopic shape and are also prominent in *Suttree*.

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<sup>35</sup> The term is used for contrastive purposes.

The central questions treated in this chapter are whether or not something as naturally linear and directional as a river can have a highlighting function in a text that is marked by tectonic structures of postmodern theory and, also, whether or not it can serve as an amplifier of a tectonic, postmodern subject. The river is a complex unity of opposites considering the full River Potential involving both physical qualities and metaphoric and symbolic connotations and it will not change from text to text but will always follow the river image as an 'echo'. When different aspects of it are emphasised in specific texts a different River Chronotope will be apparent. For the Tennessee River in *Suttree* to have an equally prominent function as the Mississippi River in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* very different river qualities must be highlighted.

### **Introductory comparison**

There are similarities and connections between Twain's Huck and McCarthy's protagonist Cornelius Suttree and, in an early review of *Suttree*, Jerome Charyn comments that McCarthy 'gives us a sense of river life that reads like a doomed "Huckleberry Finn."' The river has lost its kind edge' (Charyn, 1979, web page). The fact that both protagonists live in a boat/raft on the river, that they both leave home and family, and that they are both involved in multiracial societies, are some surface connections between the two characters. Nonetheless, important aspects make them differ radically: their attitudes and motivations and the overall atmosphere in the social space of which they are part.

Huck is an 'uncivilized' youngster running away from an abusive father and in search for a better future somewhere else. Suttree, in contrast, is a young family father who leaves his wife and son and a 'safe' upper class society and surroundings – which, generally symbolizes a promising future prospect in itself. Leaving his 'future' behind, he goes searching for his true

self, and the meaning of life in the slums of Knoxville, Tennessee. On the 'dark side of town' Suttree lives in a stationary houseboat on the river and fishes for a living. So, as we see, not only their motivation and circumstances are different, they also make use of the river in different ways; whereas Huck uses the river primarily as a means of transportation to the future, Suttree uses the river as setting and merges into its social community of 'the aberrant disordered and mad' (McCarthy, 1989, p. 3). Following, Huck's river and story has, with reason, been identified with the road genre, whereas Suttree's river and story has little resemblance with such a category. Huck is a future-oriented picaro, whereas Suttree, as I will return to, is little of the kind. Whereas Huck 'kills' himself in the very beginning of his story and starts anew on the 'river of life', Suttree's case is a different one entirely, and, one may argue, after he has succeeded in 'finding' himself or, at least, come to terms with who he is after five years in the '[E]ncampment of the damned' (McCarthy, 1989, p. 3), he leaves the story succeeding to nearly erase himself from history.

### ***The River Chronotope in Suttree***

As a physical location *Suttree's* Tennessee River is filthy to the extent of near solidness, and it is dammed.<sup>36</sup> The damming results in a lack of movement in the river and signals civilization's interruption of nature. William Prather treats the connections between the novel *Suttree* and Cormac McCarthy's experiences in real life in an article of 2005. Central in his article, "The colour of this life is water", is Tennessee Valley Authority's decision to dam up the Tennessee River in the 1950's.

'In making the gravestone tabletops in Jones' tavern a focal point of his narrative and a consideration of the dislocated gravestones a project of his protagonist, Cormac McCarthy evokes the history of the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) and its influence on the lives of people living along the Tennessee River' (Prather, 2005, p. 30).

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<sup>36</sup> C.f. 'Suttree traced with one hand dim names beneath the table stone. Salvaged from the weathers. Whole families evicted from their graves downriver by the damming of the waters' (McCarthy, 1989, p. 113).

Prather emphasizes the impact the damming had for poor people living along the river who were forced to move. Many of them were unable to buy new property and start a life somewhere else and, thus, ended up as homeless along the river banks in the Knoxville slums. With reference to Prather, I see it as only fair to assume that the rich diversity of social 'misfits' in Suttree's neighbourhood might to some extent be a reflection of the social effects of the damming of the real Tennessee River. Suttree 's hallucinations in the end of the novel of an Atlantis-like place can be read as another reference to a 'drowned' society. Whereas Atlantis sunk into the ocean, the damming of the Tennessee resulted in rising water and a 'drowning' of its natural banks: 'His dreams were of houses, their cellars and attics. Ultimately of this city in the sea' (McCarthy, 1989, p. 459).

In addition to leaving a lot of people homeless, and perhaps also hopeless, the damming resulted in extremely filthy water. The 'thick', filthy water is repeatedly mentioned throughout *Suttree*, and it strongly calls attention to, somewhat like the river running through Dickens' Coketown mentioned in Chapter 1, a disturbed society:

'[T]he river gnawed and pulled with her leathery brown waters. [...] In the fluted gullies where the river backed or eddied spondrift lay in coffeecolored foam, a curd that draped the varied flotsam locked and turning there, the driftwood and bottles and floats and the white bellies of dead fish, all wheeling slowly in the river's suck and the river spooling past unpawled with a muted seething freighting seaward her slit and her chattel and her dead' (McCarthy, 1989, p. 306).

Whereas the Mississippi brought Huck both a canoe and a raft – the means to go from 'hell' to 'Eden' – the Tennessee River 'locks' its garbage flotsam in 'coffeecolored foam' and its fish are dead. The filthy river tells a tale of a society very different from the one seen along Huck's adventurous, although serious, journey.

As mentioned before, the river serves as a location for social practice. In *Suttree*, instead of serving as a life-giving nerve like in Twain's novel, the river in McCarthy's text serves as a basis for a community of the 'dead' on its banks through the Knoxville slum. A social community which is described as equally dark and filthy as the river running through it:

'In this tall room, the cracked plaster sootstreaked with the shapes of laths beneath, this barrenness, this fellowship of the doomed. Where life pulsed obscenely fecund. In the drift of voices and the laughter and the reek of stale beer the Sunday loneliness seeped away' (McCarthy, 1989, p. 23).

Towards the end of the novel the slum area is being demolished, resulting in an even more uncertain future for the people living there. Until the destruction at least they had their community, but now it might be over and Suttree ponders that 'even the damned in hell have the community of their suffering' (McCarthy, 1989, p. 464).

According to Henri Lefebvre, as mentioned in Chapter 1, the production of *social space* is dialectical and constant where social interaction occurs. *Suttree*'s river is a place where the socially and physically dead circulate amongst the living. Dead bodies float among the flotsam on several occasions, and death is a major concern for Cornelius Suttree – how to relate to it and how to handle it. His upper-class background is very different from the world of derelicts and tosspots<sup>37</sup> in which he chooses to spend five years of his life, and the contrasts between his 'old' and 'new' world can be seen in various scenes of the novel, often in dream sections. His being in an environment new to him can also be detected in different styles of speech. Suttree generally speaks like a person of 'good' upbringing whereas his friends have a much rougher way of speaking: 'We done tried it', 'Dont spill none on your shoes', 'It'll make ye drunk', 'Here Nig, set here. Scoot over some, Bearhunter' (McCarthy, 1989, pp. 23-24). The social space created by McCarthy is thus a dialectical one in several ways.

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<sup>37</sup> Suttree lives 'in the company of thieves, derelicts, miscreants, pariahs, poltroons, spalpeens, curmudgeons, clotpolls, murderers, gamblers, bawds, whores, trulls, brigands, toppers, tosspots, sots and archsots, lobcocks, smellsmocks, runagates, rakes, and other assorted felonious debauchees' (McCarthy, 1989, p. 457).

## Postmodern Subject

As mentioned above, there one can recognise a development in general chronotopical structure from a linear towards a tectonic shape. The postmodern subject can be said to be of a tectonic shape and one can, like Timothy Melley, see the literary phenomenon as a reaction to the social phenomenon.<sup>38</sup> Melley warns against blindly accepting theoretical accounts of very dramatic historical change in human subjectivity and assertions that one concept ‘takes over’ for another. Rather, he writes in his *Empire of Conspiracy*, the different concepts of subjectivity coexist in postmodern texts (C.f. Melley, 2000, p. 185).

However, as a tendency, Melley sees the traditional view of the ‘liberal’ human subject – ‘a rational, motivated agent with a protected interior core of beliefs, desires, and memories’ (Melley, 2000, p. 14) of which Huck Finn is a typical example – to be replaced by a ‘new’ less autonomous type of subject:

“This concept of [liberal]self stands in sharp contrast to poststructural and postmodern theoretical reconceptions of subjectivity, which have exploded the assumptions of liberal individualism, arguing that identity is constructed from without, repeatedly reshaped through performance, and (in extreme accounts) best understood as a schizophrenic and anchorless array of separate components”(Melley, 2000, p. 15).

‘Constructed from without’ and ‘reshaped through performance’ the postmodern subject can be seen as a product of its environment rather than following its internal convictions. Whereas Huck Finn is more or less the prototype ‘liberal individual’, the American Adam, we soon learn that Cornelius Suttree is, in various ways, a ‘split’, fragmented or even ‘hollow’ person – He lacks a ‘protected interior core’.

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<sup>38</sup> Melley is primarily concerned with how a feeling of a loss of autonomy and the ‘postmodern transference’ in the American post-ww2 society has been expressed in conspiracy theory, thought and literature. I will not have a focus on conspiracy, but choose to use Melley’s ideas of a general tendency in the views of human subjectivity.

An image in the introduction of the novel has parallels to Suttree's character; 'Gray vines coiled leftwards in this northern hemisphere, what winds them shapes the dogwhelk's shell' (McCarthy, 1989, p. 3). Dogwhelks' shells are shaped by the surface of the shore they live on as well as by the waves that move them around - soft spineless bodies within shells that are formed by their environment. Suttree as well is shaped by his environment and searches for sense, meaning or something to fill a hollowness he experiences inside:

'A dark hand had scooped the spirit from his breast and a cold wind circled in the hollow there. [...] Suttree felt the terror coming through the walls. He was seized with a thing he'd never known, a sudden understanding of the mathematical certainty of death' (McCarthy, 1989, p. 295).

The notion that Suttree is hollow and that he takes the form and colour of his surroundings is strengthened by his thoughts towards the end of the novel: 'The color of this life is water' (McCarthy, 1989, p. 415). Clean water is neutral in colour; it takes the colour of its surroundings, and of whatever is poured into it. To a certain extent water also takes the form of its surroundings. Suttree is like the water – he takes the 'colours' of his surroundings. The tendency in this novel is that when the water is filthy and almost solid with garbage running through Knoxville, Suttree manages his days quite well, whereas when the water is colourless Suttree is 'lost'.

Suttree's hike in the Smoky Mountains can be seen as an attempt to find 'clarity' of mind. In the mountains he finds a crystal clear mountain river<sup>39</sup> but, very unlike Hemingway's Nick Adams, who finds peace of mind by his 'cleansing' Big Two-Hearted River, Suttree seems lost and actually 'emptier' by this colourless water than when on the river of filth in Knoxville. He is quite unprepared for the hike and, bringing nothing but a blanket and very little food, he starves and nearly freezes to death. The trout will not bite, and after only a

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<sup>39</sup> Based on the place names in the text (Gatlinburg and Bryson City, NC) it is not unlikely that this clear mountain river is Little Pigeon River in the Smoky Mountains, a little, distant tributary to the Tennessee River.

couple of days in the mountains he starts to feel accompanied – ‘First in dreams and then in states half wakeful’ (McCarthy, 1989, p. 285).

Lying on a gravel bar with the tips of his fingers in the icy water he could see his face above the sandy creek floor, a shifting visage hard by its own dark shadow. [...] The water sang in his head like wine’ (McCarthy, 1989, pp. 285-286).

His face in the surface of the clear water is a ‘shifting visage’ and the water sings like wine in his head. The clarity of the water does not rinse away trouble but rather reflects his instability.

### **Emptiness**

Perhaps as a reaction to his divided background,<sup>40</sup> Suttree seems to be striving to become ‘one’ and whole; ‘His subtle obsession with uniqueness troubled all his dreams’ (McCarthy, 1989, p. 113). His search for ‘uniqueness’ and meaning takes various forms, but his motivation seems stable - a filling up of the emptiness inside of him. An example from his hallucinations in the mountains shows this longing for wholeness. He is starving and cold and starting to feel accompanied and he is comfortable with a feeling that someone is going before him in the woods:

‘Some doublegoer, some othersuttree eluded him in these woods and he feared that should that figure fail to rise and steal away and were he therefore to come to himself in this obscure wood he’d be neither mended nor made whole but rather set mindless to dodder drooling with his ghostly clone from sun to sun across a hostile hemisphere forever’ (McCarthy, 1989, p. 287).

One may argue that Suttree’s postmodern emptiness is accompanied by a corresponding and desire to conserve some kind of a core or self. This paradox is underlined in his relationship with the river, which can be seen as a symbol of opposites within unity.

The River Potential’s quality of being a unity of opposites is the most prominent in *Suttree* and the duality of life and death is portrayed in a very literal way. The protagonist lives in a

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<sup>40</sup> Suttree has a divided family background: an upper class father and a working class mother, and at birth Suttree’s twin brother died.

houseboat on the river and fishes for a living. The river is heavily polluted and flotsam of garbage and dead bodies are normal occurrences. A good illustration of this life/death paradox is a morbid description in the beginning of the novel, where Suttree is pulling his lines with live fish almost simultaneous to a dead body is being “fished” out of the river after a suicide:

‘As the fisherman passed [rescue workers] were taking aboard a dead man. He was very stiff and he looked like a window-dummy save for his face. The face seemed soft and bloated and wore a grappling hook in the side of it and a crazed grin. They raised him so, gambreled up by the bones of his cheek. A pale incruent wound. He seemed to protest woodenly, his head awry’ (McCarthy, 1989, p. 9).

At the same time as representing Suttree’s foundation for life, the river is literally and metaphorically filled with death. The river and Suttree are both unities of opposites. The river is a dammed-up and nearly stagnant stream – by itself a contradiction – and is full of fish although many of them dead. Suttree is an antihero and an outcast by his own choice. Like Huck, he chooses to leave the society in which he feels unhappy and a misfit. But unlike Huck, who is consistent and ‘whole’ throughout the novel, Suttree can be seen as a person marked by fragmentation and alienation and who is searching to become ‘whole’, to find meaning and uniqueness. The emptiness inside, the lack of a unified core, is filled with whatever is closest at hand: ‘He was stayed in a peace that drained his mind, for even a false adumbration of the world of the spirit is better than none at all’ (McCarthy, 1989, p. 21).

The river imagery in *Suttree* is very different from the Edenic descriptions in Twain’s novel:

‘the river slouched past like some drear drainage from the earth’s bowels’ (McCarthy, 1989, p. 164)

‘Bearing along garbage and rafted trash, bottles of suncured glass wherein corollas of mauve and gold lie exploded, orangepeels ambered with age. A dead sow pink and bloated and jars and crates and shapes of wood washed into rigid homologues of viscera and empty oilcans locked in eyes of dishing slime where the spectra wink guiltily. One day a dead baby. Bloated, pulpy rotted eyes in a bulbous skull and little rags of flesh trailing in the water like tissuepaper’ (McCarthy, 1989, p. 306).

The projection of the river's extreme filth, death and lack of life takes focus away from any directional development, and also reflects Suttree's lack of life which is echoed in his experiences, interior and exterior.

One instance under the city during his search for Harrogate he finds unexpected hollowness which makes room for 'beastly' sewage – the garbage of man.<sup>41</sup> 'Suttree pressed on, down the carious undersides of the city, through black and slaverous cavities where foul liquors seeped. He had not known how hollow the city was. [...] True news of man here below' (McCarthy, 1989, p. 276). The hollow city is 'filled' with sewage, the Knoxville slum community of the homeless and 'doomed' is 'filled' with a 'river of death'.

The theme of death and unfruitfulness is also present in Suttree's memories of a Catholic childhood. The priests were '[g]rim and tireless in their orthopaedic moralizing. Filled with tales of sin and unrepentant deaths and visions of hell and stories of levitation and possession and dogmas of semitic damnation for the tacking up of the paraclete' (McCarthy, 1989, p. 254). As he awakes, a priest is watching him, saying 'God's house is not exactly the place to take a nap. [Upon Suttree answers] It's not God's house' (McCarthy, 1989, p. 255). These childhood memories, along with other memories we are invited into, can be understood as glimpses into Suttree's struggle for understanding and meaning. Like a 'dogwhelk', he is shaped by his surroundings, and his childhood is naturally of great importance. His claim that 'it's not God's house' may be a way of saying that it takes more than a house – it takes a

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<sup>41</sup> Harrogate has attempted to rob a bank by blowing a hole from underneath, which leads to his unfortunate blowing a hole in the city's sewage system: 'Coming down the tunnel. Something nearing in the night. A sluggish monster freed from what centuries of stony fastness under the city. Its breath washed over him in a putrid stench. He tried to crawl. He scabbled blindly among the stones in the dark. He was engulfed feet first in a slowly moving wall of sewage, a lava neap of liquid shit and soapcurd and toiletpaper from a breached main' (McCarthy, 1989, p. 270).

contents also. I.e. the city, the church, and Suttree himself, are hollow and in lack of a contents or spirit, reflection a theme that is central in postmodern literature.

The river underlines the paradoxical contrasts of life and death that Suttree reflects upon and experiences as very much present in his life. The church, a place for worship and rebirth, is filled with the priest's 'orthopaedic moralizing' – a very earthly business. The 'city on the hill' (McCarthy, 1989, p. 411) has a hollow 'underworld' filled with sewage. McCarthy's alluding to the sermon by Puritan John Winthrop, in which America was to shine as a city on a hill for the world to see, gives Suttree's discovery of the hollowness below an extra undertone. The 'promised land' is corrupted, and the river, the vein of the country, water of life, is filled with filth and death:

'Suttree among the leavings<sup>42</sup> like a mote in the floor of a beaker, come summer a bit of matter stunned and drying in the curing mud, the terra damnata of the city's dead alchemy. The fish he raised up from the flood in this season themselves looked stunned' (McCarthy, 1989, p. 306).

In the 'terra damnata' Suttree himself becomes almost a project of 'dead alchemy', a doomed attempt to make gold.

### **Split**

As briefly mentioned above, Suttree is a divided person. Already by birth he is 'split' in at least two ways; he is the product of an 'uneven' marriage, and he was born a twin - his brother dying at birth - both issues being of great importance for the forming of an identity.

Imagery circling the idea of mirroring and doubleness in contrast to unity is repeated throughout the novel. He is haunted by a vague presence of his double, his 'other', sometimes

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<sup>42</sup> McCarthy imitates T. S. Eliot's poem *Sweeney Among the Nightingales* on several occasions; 'Suttree among the leavings' (McCarthy, 1989, p. 306), 'Suttree among the rabble' (McCarthy, 1989, p. 456), 'Suttree among the watchers' (McCarthy, 1989, p. 459), and, although not so obvious, 'He was wrapped in tape to his armpits and he had an image of burial windings here in this room among the dying' (McCarthy, 1989, p. 189). Other references to Eliot's writings are also to be found, and much in McCarthy's 'world within the world' likens Eliot's *The Waste Land*. On p. 13 McCarthy plays on one of Eliot's subtitles ('Death by Water'): 'Death by drowning'.

referred to as his dead twin.<sup>43</sup> Also images of some kind of an atavistic presence are recurrent, contributing an atmosphere of doom or pre-historic existence, and it is not always clear whether or not this is his dead twin. In our very first encounter with Suttree hints at this doubleness and ‘something else’;

‘Peering down into the water where the morning sun fashioned wheels of light, coronets fanwise in which lay trapped each twig, each grain of sediment, long flakes of light in the dusty water sliding away like optic strobes where motes sifted and spun. [...] With his jaw cradled in the crook of his arm he watched idly surface phenomena, gouts of sewage faintly working, gray clots of nameless waste and yellow condoms roiling slowly out of the murk like some giant form of fluke or tapeworm. The watcher’s face rode beside the boat, a sepia visage yawning in the scum, eyes veering and watery grimace. A welt curled sluggishly on the river’s surface as if something unseen had stirred in the deeps and small bubbles of gas erupted in oily spectra’ (McCarthy, 1989, p. 7).

The ‘sepia visage yawning in the scum’ might be Suttree’s own mirror, but the ‘something unseen’ in the deeps stirring up bubbles must be something else. What is also striking is the filth and unfruitfulness in the description; sewage, waste and condoms. The images in and on this river suggest the opposite of Huck’s ‘river of life’; it suggests death and underworld.

In descriptions of Suttree’s friends and neighbours, allusions to Hades and mythology of the underworld are no longer subtle; a mad preacher screams after young Gene Harrogate ‘Spawn of Cerberus, the devil’s close kin’ (McCarthy, 1989, p. 105), and another character of inferno is brought into the story in Maggeson, a character who is somewhat of an entrepreneur; ‘Maggeson was already on the river when [Suttree] set forth, standing like some latterday Charon skulling through the fog. With a long pole he hooked condoms aboard and into a pail of soapy water’ (McCarthy, 1989, p. 107). Instead of Charon’s ‘trade’ as a ferryman on the River Acheron, Maggeson makes a business from the used symbols of unfruitfulness fished up from the dead river.

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<sup>43</sup> ‘His fetch come up from life’s other side like an autoscopic hallucination, Suttree and Anti-Suttree, hand reaching to the hand’ (McCarthy, 1989, p. 28) and ‘his ghostly clone’ who he feels accompanies him while hiking in the Smoky Mountains (McCarthy, 1989, p. 287).

An atmosphere of death and underworld is present throughout the novel. The introductory pages of the novel consist of a gloomy description of the city and suggest the similar atavistic presence mentioned above;

‘We are come to a world within a world. In these alien reaches, these maugre sinks and interstitial wastes that the righteous see from carriage and car another life dreams. [...] The city beset by a thing unknown and will it come from forest or sea? The murengers have walled the pale, the gates are shut, but lo the thing’s inside and can you guess his shape? [...] Ruder forms survive’ (McCarthy, 1989, pp. 4-5).

When Suttree’s friend Ab Jones is dead, Suttree sees something in the widow’s missing eye;

‘She had her eye closed but the lid that covered the naked socket did not work so well anymore and it sagged in the cavity and struggled up and that raw hole seemed to watch him with some ghastly equanimity, an eye for another kind of seeing like the pineal eye in atavistic reptiles watching through time, through conjugations of space and matter to that still center where the living and the dead are one’ (McCarthy, 1989, p. 447).

The constant mentions of some rudimentary beast lurking in the background, waiting to return, parallels the slow, filthy river and to Suttree’s moving about in the ‘doomed’ community in hope of gradually discovering some kind of a ‘truth’ – his way to an epiphany at the end that ‘there is one Suttree and one Suttree only’ (McCarthy, 1989, p. 461).

### **Time**

The confused or mixed reflections about life and death that are given throughout the novel partly show how the concept of time can be used in various ways. Suttree’s dreams and hallucinations in his attempts to find himself and some kind of uniqueness and clarity in the filthy social space of the dammed river give an impression of disturbed time and a disturbed society. In a 1950s society of relatively rapid mobility and communication, a dammed river which is also filthy to the extent of near solidness enhances a sense of unnatural non-directionality. A disturbed view of time can also be found in the novel via ‘attitudes’ to death,

jumps in time via Suttree's dreams and hallucinations, and in Suttree's movements when he a couple of times leaves his shantyboat:

Death always being an underlying theme in this novel, one can find literal contradictions in 'attitudes' to death are reflected in two scenes; First, from the scene mentioned above about a seemingly protesting body being 'fished' out of the river. Minutes later this body is stretched out on the river bank, and 'as Suttree passed he noticed with a feeling he could not name that the dead man's watch was still running' (McCarthy, 1989, p. 10). The second scene is from when Suttree, unwillingly, helps one of his friends of the McAnally slum, Leonard, 'bury' his long since dead father by sinking him into the river from Suttree's skiff<sup>44</sup>: 'They laid him across the seat, one leg already reaching over the side into the river as if the old man couldn't wait' (McCarthy, 1989, p. 251). The first dead man's time was not up and his 'time' is still running, whereas the second man's death was a natural one and his burial long overdue.

Through his experiences, dreams and hallucinations we follow Suttree in and out of 'worlds' or 'realities'. What is 'real' and what is not is sometimes quite diffused for both Suttree himself and the reader. This blurring of boundaries between the real and unreal is typically shown in parts of the novel where Suttree is sick or extremely exhausted (e.g. while hiking in the Smoky Mountains and while sick with typhoid fever in the end). Time is 'moving' back and forth, eddying around like the river, and it is the information we receive from these mental 'jumps' in time and space that enlighten us about Suttree's concerns and what he's searching for. Only by relating these glimpses of the past and his concerns and wishes projected via his conversations, for example with the ragman<sup>45</sup>, to his movements in the

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<sup>44</sup> Leonard's mother has kept her dead husband at home for months so as to continue to receive his welfare money, (C.f. McCarthy, 1989, pp. 241-242).

<sup>45</sup> The ragman is one of Suttree's friends along the river - an old man living under a bridge. Suttree checks on him once in a while, and they talk about matters like death and whether or not there is a God.

present do we understand a development in both character and story. He is the opposite of Huck, who we learn to know from his immediate actions and thoughts told in 1<sup>st</sup> person narrative. Huck's story is directional, consistent, and there are hardly any references to memories, dreams, and longings. Huck knows what he wants, how to get it, and acts according to it. Suttree's identity is vague for himself and for the reader. He dwells and searches in the past to find answers to who he is, what he wants, and how he will end up. Like his surroundings, the city and the river, Suttree seems 'constructed on no known paradigm, a mongrel architecture reading back through the works of man in a brief delineation of the aberrant disordered and mad' (McCarthy, 1989, p. 3).

Following the river downstream, at one point, Suttree witnesses a baptism ceremony, and is invited to get in the river and be baptised. Suttree refuses, he 'knew the river well already and he turned his back to these malingerers and went on' (McCarthy, 1989, p. 125). As he goes on, he ends up visiting his old maternal relatives. His mission seems to be a paying of a debt of twenty dollars, before he leaves again. One may see a paradox in his turning down an offer of baptism and spiritual rebirth on his way to get rid of his old dues. He rejects the river as a possible threshold. Also, as he leaves his relatives, he ends up in an abandoned old mansion where '[s]omething more than time has passed' (McCarthy, 1989, p. 136). It is unclear what has happened, but there are 'hellish' allusions and

'a faint echo of another chase. Far hue and cry and distant horns and hounds in pain with eagerness. [...] Outside darkness has begun and the hounds' voices are chimes in the distance that toll seven and cease. They wait for the waterbearer to come but he does not come, and does not come' (McCarthy, 1989, p. 136).

The 'waterbearer', the bringer of life-giving water, who 'does not come, and does not come' strengthens the unpleasant atmosphere of the Hades-like mansion with echoes of the chase of horns and hounds. (The repetition of 'does not come' is echoed in the end of the novel, when

Suttree sees himself *twinned* in the eyes of a young, angel-like boy bringing him water – a ‘watercarrier’ (p. 470)). Thus, following the river *downstream*, Suttree is offered rebirth but chooses to pay off his earthly debt of his ‘past’. Having paid, he arrives at the mansion alluding to a distant past and ancient myth.

Again the atmosphere of *Suttree*’s and the protagonist’s non-directional movements in time and on the river is paradoxical, further emphasising a disturbed and confused projection of time. The contrast to Huck’s journey on the Mississippi continues to be very clear. When Huck follows the river downstream the allusions go to Adam, Eden and the ‘river of life’ and he moves towards the future, whereas when Suttree follows the river he ends up in a distant past and the allusions are to Hades, Cerberus, and the River Acheron.

### **Has Suttree found himself?**

In an early dream about his twin brother Suttree has seen ‘how all things false fall from the dead’ (McCarthy, 1989, p. 14). If one compares this dream to a quote from the final pages we may understand it as Suttree has gone through changes, a catharsis of some kind:

‘he’d taken for talisman the simple human heart within him. Walking down the street for the last time he felt everything fall away from him. Until there was nothing left of him to shed. It was all gone. No trail, no track’ (McCarthy, 1989, p. 468).

Suttree nearly manages to erase himself out of history which is the opposite of what Huck does, staging his own death at the very beginning of his river journey. Before he leaves Knoxville for good, Suttree finds a corpse rotting in his bed in the houseboat. Suttree departs in good health, but it is a fair chance that the community will believe he’s dead. When in the hospital sick with typhoid fever he was registered as a Mr Johnson,<sup>46</sup> so as Suttree he has never been there. He fades away. Still, as the ambulance people carry away the dead body

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<sup>46</sup> Suttree’s friend J-Bone, who brought him to the hospital, stated a false name to protect Suttree against the police in search for him.

from Suttree's boat, 'three tall coloured boys' watch – an allusion to the three Fates<sup>47</sup> – 'Shit, one said. Old Suttree aint dead' (McCarthy, 1989, pp. 469-470). It is possible that Suttree himself is the atavistic potential lurking under the surface throughout the novel:

'He lay with his feet together and his arms at his sides like a dead king on an altar. He rocked in the swells, floating like the first germ of life adrift on the earth's cooling seas, formless macule of plasm trapped in a vapor drop and all creation yet to come' (McCarthy, 1989, p. 430).

### ***Shape and Conclusion***

In *Suttree* margins become central. The social space in the McAnally slums is produced by various outcasts and marginal characters. Almost impenetrable at first read, the three page detached intro of the novel serves as an entrance into an atmosphere and a milieu that stays important throughout the novel. One can claim that it serves as a three page essence of the dense novel, but without introducing any of the characters. Instead, we sense some rudimentary creature or holder of life, lurking in the dark, waiting to return: 'Ruder forms survive' (McCarthy, 1989, p. 5). Through incredibly detailed descriptions of surroundings and minute details of actions, focus is drawn from any directional flow of time towards detailed spatial 'paintings', charged with disturbed time and gloomy atmosphere.

When dammed, the river loses its natural directional flow, it disturbs life along the banks and will not be naturally rinsed in the same way a 'free' river will. This literal loss of direction in *Suttree* as a whole and clearly emphasised in the dammed river may indirectly be read as a 'tectonic', postmodern symbol. The river and Suttree's movement on it underline a 'disturbed' projection of time and a complex and social space charged with darkness and death. The filthy river, whose hellish and paradoxical qualities are nearly always in focus, resembles and emphasises Suttree's character, a hollow shell taking the colour of his

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<sup>47</sup> In Greek, Roman and Norse mythology three sisters controlled the destiny of the mortals (C.f. Jobes, 1962, p. 551).

surroundings. When compared to *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, the characteristics of Cormac McCarthy's novel become even stronger than they would read alone. The contrast from the natural atmosphere along Huck's river journey becomes very sharp in the filthy, stagnant slum of *Suttree*. *Suttree*'s river and protagonist can both be seen as 'tectonic' chronotopic structures than centred, future-oriented, and linear Huck and his 'river of life'.

## *Conclusion*

As my front page illustrates, I find it intriguing that a line from Cormac McCarthy's *Suttree* of 1979 can serve as a relevant comment to Gustave Doré's illustration of Dante's *Divine Comedy* from the 14<sup>th</sup> century, which again is based on ancient mythology. Our languages and imaginations are full of references and concepts of which we are often not aware or simply do not contemplate the range of. Idioms, metaphors, language models, and artistic expressions are likely to be based on references that are relevant to many of us. As I have suggested in Chapter 1, the River Potential is the sum of the river's physical, metaphysical and symbolical qualities. These are associations that are relatively accessible if we think it over and they play a part in our collective memory which again may colour our interpretations of texts.

In the texts used in this thesis to illustrate my idea concerning the river chronotope and its usefulness there has been a development from the free flowing Mississippi to the dammed up and controlled Tennessee; from the liberal individual to the postmodern subject; from Huck as Adam to *Suttree*'s 'things falling apart' – his centre is not there; from linear to tectonic chronotopical structure. Huck's Adamic state and natural mobility leads him to spiritual prosperity, whereas *Suttree* jumps off his father's world of progress and stays nearly stagnant in the 'inferno'-like slums of Knoxville, the community of the doomed, till he fades away, perchance to return.

As new technology of close to instantaneous communication is becoming a larger part of our everyday, the boundaries of time and space are additionally altered. Our privileged western lives are more and more marked by simultaneity and access, networking and multi-tasking, speed and overflow in information and competing forces in mass media. As I have stated

earlier I understand literature to reflect its contemporary society. So, how can the river work as a literary device today – and in the future? I presume the universal aspects of the river based on original myth will most likely stand strong as a symbol of questions important to humankind. The realisation of the particular River Chronotope, on the other hand, will have to continue to comment on the contemporary issues to follow in the tracks of the development I have illuminated in this thesis. Perhaps the dam will burst and mere chaos is loose:

*'The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere  
the ceremony of innocence is drowned'*<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> From 'The Second Coming' by William Butler Yeats, 1920 (In: Abrams, 2000, pp. 2106-2107).

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