TEMA

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Humour: M. Twain. H. James and Cosmopolitanism

El humorismo: M. Twain. H. James y el cosmopolitismo.

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Material de elaboración propia a partir de las fuentes oficiales que se citan al final del tema. No es un temario oficial ni sustituye a la normativa publicada.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Few authors have opened a book with a more audacious threat than Mark Twain. At the head of Adventures of Huckleberry Finn he placed a 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." The joke is a perfect miniature of American humour: it is deadpan, it pretends to be official, and it hides a serious book behind a laugh. Henry James, by contrast, gave his readers advice that sounds almost like a motto for cosmopolitanism. In The Ambassadors, a middle-aged American in Paris tells a young man: "Live all you can; it's a mistake not to." Two writers, two registers, one question: what does it mean to be an American writer in the second half of the nineteenth century, at home in the Mississippi valley or at ease in Europe?

This topic asks us to study humour through Mark Twain and cosmopolitanism through Henry James. I will first place both writers in their context, the United States after the Civil War. Secondly, I will examine Twain's life, his comic techniques and his main works, from the travel writing of the 1860s to Huckleberry Finn and the later, darker satire. Thirdly, I will study James, his transatlantic life and what critics call the "international theme". Fourthly, I will compare the two and show that humour and cosmopolitanism are less distant than they seem. Finally, I will consider the pedagogical and didactic implications of this material in the Secondary and Bachillerato classroom.

Before moving on, I would like to mention the sources consulted: Peter Messent's The Cambridge Introduction to Mark Twain, Everett Emerson's Mark Twain: A Literary Life, Fred Kaplan's Henry James: The Imagination of Genius, A Biography, and Richard Gray's A History of American Literature, together with the primary texts, available at Project Gutenberg. For the didactic section I will refer to the LOMLOE and to the state and Extremaduran curricula that develop it.