

The representation of Mexican characters in American literature: from stereotype to humanity

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This study examines the trajectory of Mexican character representation in American literature, tracing its development from rigid stereotype to complex humanity. The primary focus rests on Thomas Mayne Reid's 1866 novel *The Headless Horseman* as a foundational text featuring a negative portrayal, before turning briefly to two contemporary works that deliberately write against this inherited literary fate: Thomas Savage's *The Power of the Dog* and Cristina Henríquez's *The Book of Unknown Americans*.

Throughout the American literary canon, Mexican characters are prevalent but largely relegated to a state of use rather than presence of humanity. As a scholar Juan J. Alonzo argues, these characters functioned as "the apparatus of disavowal" — a means for acknowledging Mexican existence on the continent while maintaining "a sense of justification for dispossession and eviction." They were confined to a rigid regime of stereotypes: the 'greaser,' the 'fey, exotic, and doomed senorita,' and the 'voiceless laborer' or 'peon' [1]. These figures, "trapped in an oppressive web of stereotypical roles," were consistently marginalized or "deleted as part of the larger process" of Manifest Destiny [2]. However, this established literary fate is broken in later works. In Henríquez's *The Book of Unknown Americans*, Mexican immigrants move from the background to the "center of the action," becoming narrators endowed with "agency and interiority" [3]. Similarly, Savage's *The Power of the Dog* subverts the Western genre: Peter, half-Mexican, initially fills the classic 'foil' role but ultimately uses his intelligence to destroy his abuser, his destiny one of "inheritance" and survival [4].

The quintessential archetype of negative portrayal is Reid's *The Headless Horseman*. Set on the Texas-Mexico border territory, the novel features Isidora Covarubio de los Llanos, the exemplars of the 'Señorita' stereotype — beautiful, fiery, and tragically in love with the Anglo-Irish hero. Her death is narratively necessary: she presents a romantic, racial obstacle to the successful white union and must be removed as a "literary clearing of the land" [5]. Supporting characters like Diaz the vaquero are depicted solely as subservient followers; the language of the text consistently insists on the superior intellectual and moral standard of Anglo characters [6]. The novel enforces a strict literary destiny upon its Mexicans: they are either faithful employees serving white ambition or tragic figures to be cleared from the American future. Contemporary authors like Henríquez and Savage write precisely against this inherited narrative.

The contrast between their protagonists demonstrates a clear evolution. Peter Gordon from *The Power of the Dog*, a quiet teenager of Mexican descent on a 1920s Montana ranch, is mocked for his ethnicity by the antagonist Phil Burbank. Yet Peter's patience and hidden strength culminate in Phil's death through cold, calculated intelligence — he is a survivor who dismantles the Western myth from within [4]. This stands in stark contrast to Alma Rivera from *The Book of Unknown Americans*, a woman who leaves Mexico for modern-day Delaware. Her isolation, language barriers, and slow loss of hope expose the emotional reality of the immigrant experience: the feeling of invisibility and the quiet strength required for daily survival [3]. One

character acts as a silent force of justice deconstructing the Old West; the other offers a realistic portrait of vulnerability at the hidden foundations of modern America.

To conclude, the journey from Isidora Covarubio de los Llanos to Peter Gordon and Alma Rivera charts a significant transformation in American letters. Where once Mexican characters existed merely as instruments of Manifest Destiny — doomed lovers or voiceless laborers whose removal was narratively necessary — they now occupy the center of their own stories. Savage grants the marginal figure a quiet, lethal agency; Henríquez presents the immigrant as a fully realized human being with interiority, sacrifice, and dignity. This shift does not erase the troubling legacy of texts like *The Headless Horseman*, but it demonstrates that American literature possesses the capacity to confront its inherited prejudices and write against a destiny once considered inevitable.

Источники и литература

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