

Mark Twain's Messengers for a Fallen World: Supernatural Strangers in "The War-Prayer" and *The Mysterious Stranger Manuscripts*

Nancy VON ROSK

The stranger is a familiar figure in Mark Twain's work. Huck Finn, Pudd'nhead Wilson and Hank Morgan are all defined by their outsider status as well as their superiority to the societies from which they stand apart. Yet whether these figures have superior morality, intellect or technical expertise, they are nevertheless not completely separate from the societies they implicitly criticize. Pudd'nhead Wilson becomes mayor of the town that once laughed at him; Hank Morgan marries a woman from Arthurian England and yearns to return there, and even Huck Finn joins Tom Sawyer in imprisoning Jim, never completely understanding whether he or society is right. The boundaries then between the outsider and society are often ambiguous in Twain's works, and the supposed superiority of the stranger may be called into question.

The stranger continues to play an important role in Twain's later works such as "The War-Prayer" and *The Mysterious Stranger Manuscripts*; however, the strangers in these works are far stranger; now the stranger is a supernatural figure—an angel or "messenger from God"—suggesting not only Twain's more profound alienation from American society and politics, but also the keener sense of moral authority this position had given him. Indeed, as these figures highlight the absurdity of the human condition, they are completely detached from the societies they come to criticize, and there is no more ambiguity regarding where they stand.

Twain's language in "The War-Prayer" highlights the stranger's newfound separation from humanity: Movement, noise, and passion are opposed to stillness and solemn calm. We are told in the essay's opening that the crowd and the country are "up in arms"; violent energy is reinforced with words like "beating," "hissing," "popping," and "spluttering" (218). The language evokes not just noise and movement, but emotional excess. There is not just applause, there are "cyclones of applause," and as people listen to "patriotic orato-

ry," they are "panting"; their voices are "choked" (218). While the oratory stirs "the deepest deeps of their hearts" and the sons hope to die "the noblest of noble deaths," the "organ burst shook the building" (218, 219). Indeed, the commotion and emotional frenzy in the church echo the "gathering momentum" of the anticipated battle (218). The language continues to build in intensity as the "long prayer" is recited. The prayer, however, is suddenly interrupted when an "aged stranger" enters, and here the imagery dramatically shifts. As the stranger makes his "silent way," and moves with a "slow and noiseless step," he is reminiscent of an Old Testament prophet as well as Twain himself, for he is "clothed in a robe that reached to his feet. . . his white hair descending in a frothy cataract to his shoulders" (219). His face is "seamy" and "unnaturally pale," and while he stands "waiting," his eyes burn with an "uncanny light" (219). This white, aged, silent, and still figure is dramatically set against all the "young faces alight with martial dreams" (218). Seemingly coming from another world, he is "pale even to ghastliness," speaks in a "deep voice" and declares, "I come from the Throne—bearing a message from Almighty God" (219).

Satan, a.k.a. Philip Traum, meanwhile, is a young angel, a nephew of *the* Satan who has "a winning face and a pleasant voice" (283). While seemingly very different at first from the "The War-Prayer's" stern messenger, Traum nevertheless sounds very much like this solemn figure. Both messengers are especially intent on dramatizing the foolishness of human beings, especially the limits of human knowledge. Satan continually tells the boys: "Your race never know good fortune from ill. They are always mistaking the one for the other" (327). The speaker in "The War-Prayer," meanwhile, declares that a person's prayer asks "for more than he who utters it is aware of—except he pause and think" (220). The people, he suggests, pray "ignorantly" and "unthinkingly" (220). Indeed, both strangers are determined to reveal humanity to itself, to show the dark undercurrent of civilization. In order to explain the prayer's "full import," to the congregation, God's messenger must make the meaning of war clear in all its horror so he describes soldiers torn "to bloody shreds," the "shrieks of the wounded, writhing in pain," and the "wastes of their desolated lands" (220). Satan too must dramatize the horror of war in order to enlighten Theodor and the boys. As Theodor puts it: "his theater was at work again and before our eyes, nation after nation drifted by during two or three centuries, a mighty procession, an endless procession, raging, struggling, wallowing through seas of blood, smothered in battle-smoke through which the flags glinted and the red jets from the cannon darted; and always we heard the thunder of the guns and the cries of the dying" (347). Although the congregation in "The War-Prayer" is unaffected by the stranger in their midst, the boys in *The Mysterious Stranger* are deeply moved by Satan. In fact, Satan stops his speech because, as The-

odor puts it, “he saw by our faces how much we were hurt, and he cut his sentence short and stopped chuckling” (348). Finally, Theodor decides “all he had said was true” (366).

Both works then, while reflecting how Twain’s use of the stranger becomes less ambiguous in his later work, also dramatize another recurring theme: Twain’s alternating pessimism and optimism regarding humanity. At the end of *The Mysterious Stranger Manuscripts*, Theodor discovers Satan to be his own creation, his own vision; he recognizes his role in the cruelty of the world and seems more aware, more sensitive, indeed more enlightened. There is, however, no enlightenment in “The War-Prayer.” “The War-Prayer,” while echoing some of the motifs from *The Mysterious Stranger*, is a much darker work. Indeed, comparing these works reminds us of both the moral sensitivity Twain often associated with childhood as well as the foolish conformity he saw all too often in the adult world. Satan then has an advantage over Twain’s other “uncanny” messenger since his audience is an audience of children. Satan also is able to show his audience actual pictures—visions—while “The War-Prayer” messenger has only words. While words in “patriotic oratory” may have the power to move the congregation, words from the mouth of God’s messenger miss the mark. Perhaps most pessimistic then is that Twain has dramatized the failure of his words to move people in “The War-Prayer.” Despite this stranger’s authority and “uncanny” abilities, he does not influence, enlighten or spend much time at all with fallen humanity; instead he is dismissed as a “lunatic because there was no sense in what he said” (221). Still the solitary insistence of this stranger before a crazed and uncomprehending crowd only reinforces for us the incredible courage, daring, and defiance that came to define Mark Twain.

Works Cited

Kaplan, Justin. *Great Short Works of Mark Twain*. New York: HarperCollins, Perennial Classics, 2004.