

The Vision of the Other in Mark Twain's "War-Prayer"

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Mark Twain's official biography, published two years after his death, contains his cold assertion, in reference to "The War-Prayer," that ". . . only dead men can tell the truth in this world" (Paine 1234). This may certainly have been his belief at the time of the assessment, but for the reader of Twain's works it is evident that he was capable of his share of truth-telling throughout his career, or at least providing us with sufficiently convincing glimpses of ourselves, through his depiction of real or fictitious characters, to draw us in and capture our attention. It is indeed, this ability, to see ourselves, through others, and, just as importantly, in others, that renders his work, whether categorized as humorous, ironic, satirical, or polemical, easily accessible to the reader who ventures to take the journey. As Twain himself describes the influence of literal, as well as figurative, travel, "It liberalizes the Vandal to travel—you never saw a bigoted, opinionated, stubborn, narrow-minded, self-conceited, almighty mean man in your life but he had stuck in one place since he was born. . ." (Fatout 36). While Twain certainly, from a literal standpoint, was the most-traveled author of his generation, it is critical to observe that his travels, in a more literary sense, include the ability to transform his perspective to that of the Other and, ultimately, to conclude that the distinction between himself and the Other is often a matter of unexamined habit or convenience.

In "The War-Prayer," Twain's mysterious stranger asks and answers the rhetorical question "Is it one prayer? No, it is two—one uttered, the other not," as a means of leading the reader to the vision of the other. This is an Other, including the members of the congregation, who stands to experience soldiers torn "to bloody shreds" covering "smiling fields with the pale forms of their patriot dead," hearing "shrieks of their wounded, writhing in pain," or seeing "humble homes" wasted "with a hurricane of fire, . . . the hearts of . . . unoffending widows with unavailing grief, . . . the wastes of their desolated land." In the jingoistic fervor of the turn of the last century, during which the United States brutally suppressed the independence movement led by Aguinaldo in the Philippines in the wake of the Spanish-American War and assisted in the re-establishment of European hegemony over the coastal regions of China following the Boxer rebellion, Twain was not reticent in expressing his revulsion towards his country's policies. In "The War-Prayer," a product of this revulsion, he also attempts to unmask the denial of the other, disguised in the "holy

fire of patriotism,” the sustaining basis for his country’s foreign adventures. Twain was well aware that these sentiments would not be published even as he wrote of the “rash spirits that ventured to disapprove of the war,” but, as is the case throughout his adult life, he often feels compelled to commit his other-based perspective to writing regardless of the consequences. In a later reference to his public attacks on American missionaries in China he states that “. . . I did not do it for any reason but just the one; that the inclination to do it was stronger than my diplomatic instincts, and I had to obey and take the consequences” (Geismar 202).

Twain’s capacity for seeing the world through the eyes of the Other, while certainly not uniformly evident in his writings, likely has its seeds in his Hannibal childhood. The young Sam Clemens, who accepts the institution of slavery as an unquestioned aspect of everyday life, nevertheless is impressed by the hidden suffering of the hireling slave Sandy, whose silence is a signal to Sam’s mother that he may be thinking of his own mother, who he “will never see . . . again” (*Autobiography* 102). Jane Clemens’s revelation of the silent suffering of the “cheery” slave may not have exactly constituted an epiphany to young Sam, but the fact that this episode, apocryphal or otherwise, is recounted over a half-century later in Twain’s *Autobiography* is strong evidence of a nascent, developing ability to empathize with the experience of the Other. This capacity becomes apparent even in his formative years as a writer, when, for example, while serving his journalistic apprenticeship in Nevada and California during the 1860s, Twain castigates whites reacting negatively to the participation of blacks in a Fourth of July parade by describing them as the “. . . class of fellow-citizens who persist, in the most short-sighted manner, in being on bad terms with them in the face of the fact that they have got to sing with them in heaven or scorch with them in hell some day in the most familiar and sociable way, and on a footing of most perfect equality” (Branch and Hirst 248). During the same period Twain had ample opportunity to observe the travails of the Chinese immigrants in Nevada and California, an experience which, as a direct result of his ability to adopt the perspective of the Other, enabled him to draw the sympathetic portrait in Chapter 54 of *Roughing It* and certainly underlies his empathy with the Boxers at the turn of the century. Three decades later, with his celebrity status long-established, Twain wrote his essay, “Concerning the Jews,” after witnessing open anti-Semitism in Europe, asserting that “I can stand any society. All that I care to know is that a man is a human being—that is enough for me: he can’t be any worse” (12).

At the time of the writing of “The War-Prayer,” Twain was aware of the need of the imperialist powers to denigrate the other as a precondition to asserting a beneficent justi-

fiction for the subjugation of the native populations. These powers acted in accord with Kipling's assertion, at the height of Britain's extension of empire, of the duty to take up "the white man's burden." Twain's experience, however, has taught him a quite different lesson; specifically, that "The only very marked difference between the average civilized man and the average savage is, that the one is gilded, the other painted" (*Notebook* 392).

By contemporary standards, Twain's capacity to ignore the conventional divisions that separate one person from the other, one "civilization" from another, or one race or ethnic subculture from another, can certainly be debated, but there can be no reasonable doubt about Twain's recognition and deliberate focus on the importance of the perspective of the other. In perhaps the most famous example of the exercise in his fiction, *Huckleberry Finn*, unaccustomed to the idea that a slave can feel the same types and degree of attachment to family as anyone else, after repeated observations of Jim's nocturnal "moaning and mourning," concludes "...I do believe he cared just as much for his people as white folks does for their'n. It don't seem natural, but I reckon it's so" (201). It is not too much of a "stretcher" for the reader to determine that the primary "moral" of *Huckleberry Finn*, despite Twain's admonition to the contrary, is the transformative power of the ability to adopt the perspective of the Other.

It is exactly this ability, rendered in "The War-Prayer" as the vision of interchangeability of the members of the congregation with their intended victims, that gives this work its stark, unadorned power. Although "The War-Prayer" antedates the then unimaginable infliction of suffering during the First World War, it is obvious that Twain's capacity for realizing the horror of war is, to a remarkable degree, no less convincing than those who experienced it first-hand. Twain would no doubt recognize the ability to identify with the Other displayed in the best-known work about the First World War, Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*. The protagonist, a young German soldier who eagerly volunteers to join the fight in response to his own feelings of patriotism, eventually, through the repeated ravages of trench warfare and contact with the enemy, has his own encounter with the notion of the Other.

It is strange to see these enemies of ours so close up. They have faces that make one think.... They ought to be put to threshing, reaping, and apple picking. They look just as kindly as our own peasants. . . . (192).

It would take the undeniably horrible devastation of the First World War before recognition of the implications of denial of the Other, expressed cogently in "The War-Prayer,"

could be as forthrightly portrayed in literature as is the case in *All Quiet on the Western Front*. Even this recognition, of course, was insufficient and temporary in its impact.

Finally, it should be noted that the invocation of “the God of Battles, beseeching His aid in our good cause,” constitutes another attempt by Twain to clear the psychological debris that separates the individual members of the congregation from the enemy-Other. Twain’s jaundiced and critical views of organized religion in general are well-known, but, in “The War-Prayer,” he pulls no punches in lambasting the conscription, as it were, of a one-sided deity. This is not a novel theme for Twain at the time he wrote “The War-Prayer.” Consider that, in the very first of his great literary efforts, *The Innocents Abroad*, he responds to the “grumblers at the prayers” requesting divine intervention in the form of “fair winds” with the following repudiation:

. . . they know as well as I do that this is the only ship going east this time of year, but there’s a thousand coming west—what’s a fair wind for us is a *head* wind to them—the Almighty’s blowing a fair wind for a thousand vessels, and this tribe wants him to turn it clear around so as to accommodate *one*, and she a steamship at that! It ain’t good sense, it ain’t good reason, it ain’t good Christianity, it ain’t common human charity. Avast with such nonsense!” (46, italics in original).

Years later, in writing contemporaneous with “The War-Prayer” which would see publication in his *Autobiography*, Twain sardonically comments on the “white man’s” god, one which cannot see the world through the eyes of the Other, in this case, the American Indian.

Thanksgiving Day became a habit, for the reason that in the course of time, as the years drifted on, it was perceived that the exterminating had ceased to be mutual and was on the white man’s side, consequently on the Lord’s side. . . (292).

The invitation to adopt the perspective of the Other, or, in a more explicit plot device, the demonstration of the possibility that each actor could, indeed, *be* the Other, are the wellsprings of much of Twain’s best writing. For examples of the latter, one need look no further than *The Prince and the Pauper*, where each main actor assumes the role of the Other, or the denouement of *Pudd’head Wilson*, during which two of the actors are revealed to be, in fact, the Other. The vision of the Other, in perhaps its most naked, forthright presentation, is the force which, when all else is considered, renders *The War Prayer*, as well as its author, a permanent fixture in our communal legacy, at least as long as there

are wars to be fought and human foibles to be exposed.

Note

The "Fair Winds" prayer from Chapter Four of *The Innocents Abroad* was brought to my attention by Barbara Schmidt, of Tarleton University, also Book Reviews Editor of the Mark Twain Forum.

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