Cuba Libre at Odds: Hemingway, Twain, and the Spanish-American War

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Harry Morgan, the tough-guy protagonist in Ernest Hemingway's *To Have and Have Not* (1937), asks the barman, Freddy, at his favorite bar in Key West, Florida, "What's the lady drinking?" referring to the wife of a wealthy tourist. Hearing that she is having "A Cuba Libre," he replies, "Then give me a straight whiskey" (Chap. 15). Morgan's "then" is heavy with sarcasm to the "Haves" who enjoy rum and coke as opposed to his strong, manly "straight" whiskey. Ironically, however, the cocktail provocatively evokes the history which now enables Morgan to somehow make ends meet in the hard-time depression

era by smuggling goods and suspicious individuals between the Florida Keys and Havana, Cuba. Meaning "Free Cuba," "Cuba Libre" was supposedly concocted for the first time by U.S. soldiers stationed in Cuba during the Spanish-American War when they celebrated the recently "freed" Cuba. Owing to the close relationship between the two countries after the war, Harry Morgan can rather freely run back and forth across the Gulf Stream.

However, on the other hand, the story of the origin of the cocktail certainly obscures the imperialist nature of American intervention into Spanish-Cuban affairs and the consequent power structure between America and Cuba. It seems that Hemingway had the metaphorical meaning of the cocktail in mind when he made the "lady" have a glass of Cuba Libre, as the scene deepens the irony if rum and coke represents the vexed relationship of the two countries—America, the country which "has," and Cuba, the country which "has not"— between which Harry Morgan, the impoverished American, was caught.

As the Cuba Libre example suggests, Hemingway's literature was framed at a deep level by a series of events summarized as the Spanish-American War. Most of all, Hemingway's lifelong enthusiasm for bullfighting and its mother country, Spain, would have taken different forms but for the war. The Spanish-American War broke out just a year before the writer was born, and had a significant impact on twentieth-century America as well as on Hemingway. It is often pointed out that the Spanish-American War marked the turn of American society into its imperialist phase. As "The War-Prayer" demonstrates, Mark Twain protested against this imperialist America.

It is fairly well known that Hemingway declared in *Green Hills of Africa* (1935) that "All modern American literature comes from one book by Mark Twain called *Huckleberry Finn*." However, the fact that he had noted much the same praise of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* in his letter to Ernest Walsh dated January 2, 1926, is less well-known. The letter attests that Hemingway appreciated Twain's masterpiece at quite an early stage of his career, which encourages us to compare the works of Twain and Hemingway more carefully and thoroughly than ever.

In fact, ironies in "The War-Prayer" are similar to Hemingway's heroes' attitudes toward WWI. For example, in *Farewell to Arms* (1929), Frederic Henry laments that he has "seen nothing sacred [in the war], and the things that were glorious had no glory and the sacrifices were like the stockyards at Chicago"; he is also "embarrassed by the words sacred, glorious, and sacrifice and the expression in vain" as he has "heard them, sometimes standing in the rain almost out of earshot, so that only the shouted words came through, and had read them, on proclamations that were slapped up by billposters over other proclamations, now for a long time" (Chap. 27). Frederic Henry expresses a skeptical viewpoint

on patriotism and fine words that embellish war, the viewpoint Twain has adopted in "The War-Prayer."

However, in contrast to Frederic Henry's nonchalant, detached posture—he later in the novel simply decides to "forget the war" as he has "made a separate peace" (Chap. 34)—Twain's stranger who delivers the war prayer is so impassioned that he is finally believed to be a "lunatic." Just as the stranger's estrangement from others reminds us of Huck Finn's resolution to "*go* to hell" when he decides to rescue Jim (*Adventure of Huckleberry Finn*; Chap. 31), Twain and his fictional character seem determined to take direct responsibility for social events which they believe wrong or unfair even if their actions result in their alienation from society. The point is the relation between an individual and social evils—slavery and racism in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and imperialism in "The War-Prayer" and how the former responds to the latter. "The War-Prayer" illustrates Twain's belief that he, as a contemporary citizen, could change the course of imperialist America, or, at least, should resist it. To Hemingway, on the contrary, war is something which is beyond one's control. As is partly clear from his insistence that "[i]f you read it [*Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*] you must stop where the Nigger Jim is stolen from the boys" (*Green Hill of Africa*; Chap. 1), Hemingway had a passive attitude to social events compared to Twain, though they both had keen insight into contemporary social issues.

Ever since Hemingway quoted Gertrude Stein's comment, "You are all a lost generation," as an epigraph to *The Sun Also Rises* (1926), the young Hemingway has typified the "lost generation" writers. This group of writers highlighted nihilistic attitudes widely shared by the younger generation after World War I. It cannot be denied that the modern war scene they witnessed significantly changed their perspectives toward life. Nevertheless, it still seems possible to suggest that the cynicism or hedonistic self-indulgence that pervaded 1920s America might be partly traced back to the deterministic acceptance of the emergent imperialist America around the turn of the century and that the lost generation might be redefined as the post war generation of the Spanish-American War. Twain's influence runs deep in Hemingway's literature. Precisely because of this fact, the differences between the two writers can be foregrounded all the more. Even if we have not found any evidence suggesting that Hemingway ever read Twain's "War-Prayer," this piece and Twain's other related writings on the Philippine-American War are indispensable materials for further exploration of this topic.