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Author

Lock, Helen

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Twain's Rhetoric of Irony in "The War-Prayer"

Helen LOCK

The point made by Mark Twain's "The War-Prayer" (1905) is simple, even simplistic: that the unspoken part of the desire for victory over the enemy is the desire that misery and death befall others. The irony, as noted by the stranger who comments on this silent prayer, is that it is directed supposedly "in the spirit of love" to "Him who is the Source of Love" (398). In fact, Twain's piece makes this irony unmissable, as it ends with the failure of the congregation even to understand the stranger's point, let alone to take it to heart: "It was believed afterward that the man was a lunatic, because there was no sense in what he

said" (398).

This inability to "get it," this immunity to irony, recalls many of Twain's characters over the years, most forcibly perhaps the townspeople of Dawson's Landing in *Pudd'nhead Wilson* (written about ten years earlier), who fail to understand Wilson's ironic joke and thus doom him to twenty years of mislabeling as a pudd'nhead. Another ten years before that, we have the numerous ironies of *Huckleberry Finn*, notably Huck's failure to understand that the most selfless act of his life has not condemned him to hell (and, between the two, such ironies as those produced by transposing a Yankee to King Arthur's Court). It seems clear when retracing the development of Twain's style through his career that his use of irony—always one of his key rhetorical devices—becomes increasingly heavy-handed the older and the angrier he became. Huck's "failure" is innocent; that of the congregation in "The War-Prayer" is not.

Albert Bigelow Paine quotes Twain as writing on New Year's Eve 1900-01:

A GREETING FROM THE NINETEENTH TO THE TWENTIETH CENTURY
I bring you the stately nation named Christendom, returning, bedraggled, besmirched, and dishonored, from pirate raids in Kiao-Chou, Manchuria, South Africa, and the Philippines, with her soul full of meanness, her pocket full of boodle, and her mouth full of pious hypocrisies. Give her soap and a towel, but hide the looking-glass. (*Europe* xxxiv)

Here, only the adjective "stately" tells us that the intended tone is irony, before Twain starts hammering home his point; and it is precisely the behavior of Christendom in the Philippines that would lead, in 1904-5, to the barely disguised fury that makes "The War-Prayer"'s irony so unsubtle. Unsubtle is not the same as ineffective, of course, but insidiousness usually serves irony better.

It was still Twain's only appropriate rhetorical device, however, given that irony is inherently dualistic: it says or implies one thing, it means another; it has a stated (often false) meaning, and a silent (true) meaning; and it is only possible to negotiate how to read it "correctly" because it is, as Wayne Booth says, a dual "operation . . . performed together by authors and readers" (8). Twain's life, always marked by dualism (as all the twins and doubles in his work attest), was at the time of "The War-Prayer" consumed by it: "Clemens the man was at odds with Twain the image," producing "tension between the private and the public figure, his tragic and comic qualities" (Gribben 38). His concern—or, rather, his wife's—for his image was one chief reason such works as "The War-Prayer" were published only posthumously, even though (another irony) he was openly and vociferously a vice-president of the American Anti-Imperialist League for eleven years. So, in "The

War-Prayer” as in *The Mysterious Stranger* and “The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg,” Twain’s opinions come not out of his own mouth, but from that of a doppelgänger, a mysterious stranger, whose words convey their meaning to the (ideal) reader, but—ironically—fall on stony ground with regard to the speaker’s immediate audience. “The outsider’s failure is rhetorical insofar as Twain believed it might inspire his readers’ education, yet he also believed the polarity between society and outsider represented an actual split between public opinion and the facts of life” (Baender 193). This was the era of naturalism, and it seemed to Twain ever more obvious that human beings were conditioned, or conditioned themselves, to turn a blind eye to the worst of these inevitable and predetermined facts.

The Philippine-American War—then and until very recently known as the Philippine Insurrection—was precisely the kind of event destined to throw this split between public opinion and “the facts of life” into sharp relief and thus to kindle Twain’s wrath. Public opinion found the notion of empire enticing and rejoiced over Dewey’s victory at Manila, a place previously unheard-of by most Americans (“this great big ignorant nation, which doesn’t know even the ABC facts of the Philippine episode,” Twain complained in a 1901 letter to Joseph H. Twichell [qtd. in Paine, *Letters* 705]). Such jingoism was, at the same time, often opposed for equally base, often racist and xenophobic reasons. Twain’s own opposition is eerily prophetic of opposition to war in both Vietnam and Iraq: the war was “a mess, a quagmire from which each fresh step renders the difficulty of extrication immensely greater” I thought it would be a great thing to give a whole lot of freedom to the Filipinos, but I guess now that it’s better to let them give it to themselves,” he said in 1900 (Zwick). Yet in the letter to Twichell, he acknowledges that his opposition is, at bottom, selfish: he feels distress as an American that he is “befouled” in the international eye (that of “the sarcastic world,” as he put it) by such a policy (705). Dualism again: are his motives even partly genuine concern for the Philippines, or, as he suspects of himself, solely a matter of concern for his public image, by now that of an internationally famous American often asked his opinion of such matters?

The guilt suggested by the latter possibility is further complicated by the racial aspects of the war, and by Twain’s own (surely by now almost exhaustively studied) conflicted, conflicting, and evolving responses to the racial Other. Twain noted, as Jim Zwick points out, that many American service personnel characterized Filipinos as “niggers” (Zwick also attests that contemporary editorial cartoons often depicted them as “stereotyped blacks”)—an uncomfortable reminder of the patronizing attitudes of even well-meaning Americans in an earlier war, one with which Twain had been uncomfortable enough the first time around. This time the American intent to liberate and democratize this Other

had turned out to be an even more blatant self-deception at the very best; the fundamental purpose of the Philippine conflict was a scarcely disguised colonization, and therefore subjugation. (After all, the United States had, in effect, bought the Philippines—and therefore its inhabitants—under the terms of the Treaty of Paris.) Twain at this point in his life wanted to be unambiguously on the right side of this war: no echoes of the brief spell as an irregular in the Confederacy-sympathizing Missouri State Guard, or of the truck with slave-owning relatives, no uncomfortably nuanced racial attitudes in his writings. But to take such a stance meant dealing in unavoidable ironies, since both sides—just as in 2005—were laying claim to the word *patriotism*, and defining it in opposite ways.

To the war's advocates, *patriotism* meant increasing the territory and inhabitants over which America held sway and could feel nationalistic pride. To its detractors, the word meant advocacy of the right to self-determination: a principle on which the United States was founded, and which it defended on behalf of others. There was no way to talk about this war, therefore, that could be understood unambiguously by both sides; the only way to talk about it was in the double language of irony, especially for this inherently dualistic man. Yet the intensity of the struggle between preservation of the image and the fury of the private man produced an irony so vehement that it turns itself inside out, revealing the reality behind the ironic mask. That reality is indeed, like the message of the piece, simple: Twain was damned if he spoke the truth and damned if he disguised it, and because he tried to do both, the predictable reaction to "The War-Prayer" was to damn it to oblivion because "there was no sense in what he said." And one hundred years later, the congregation's inoculation against irony seems to be holding.

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