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Journal of Transnational American Studies

Title

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Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/5zs4253w>

Journal

Journal of Transnational American Studies, 1(1)

Author

Mac Donnell, Kevin

Publication Date

2009-02-16

DOI

10.5070/T811006957

Peer reviewed

Mark Twain and Gensai Murai: A Japanese Inspiration for "The War-Prayer"

Kevin MAC DONNELL

While the probable influence of various writings and events on Mark Twain's composition of "The War-Prayer" can be debated, in at least one instance there is irrefutable evidence that Mark Twain had in his hands a book that likely influenced his language and imagery, and perhaps even supplied the central theme of his anti-war protest. The book is Gensai Murai's Meiji romance, *Hana, A Daughter Of Japan*.

Gensai Murai (1863-1927) was a popular and prolific newspaper editor, a descendant of a distinguished samurai family, and author of a massive fictional saga that filled twelve volumes with over 1,200 chapters. In the midst of the Russo-Japanese War in 1904, *Hana* was published in English by the *Hochi Shimbun*, Murai's newspaper publisher in Tokyo. It was intended to introduce Murai's adult fiction to American readers, with the explicit hope that it would be followed by more English translations of his works, but only one new translation of his work appeared, in 1905. *Hana* was printed in Japan, and bound in a traditional Kangxi binding (with six stab-holes instead of the usual four), with three beautiful polychrome illustrations and nine other tinted woodcuts by Suzuki Kason, and housed in a traditional silk folding case with ivory clasps. That same year, one of Murai's works for young readers, *Kibun Daizin, Or, From Shark-Boy To Merchant Prince*, was published by The Century Company in New York. Although printed and bound in Japan, the English text of *Hana* was set in Ronaldson Old Style Monotype, a new type-face first introduced in 1903 and already put into use by The Century Company (Harper, Houghton-Mifflin, MacMillan, and other American publishers were using other older variants of Old Style rather than this new monotype version). While it cannot be verified in *Publisher's Trade-List Annual* or the new publications listings in *Publisher's Weekly*, it seems probable that the type-setting for *Hana* was executed by The Century Company, who probably also act-

ed as the American distributor. It is unknown how Mark Twain came by his copy, but The Century Company routinely sent him copies of their new publications, and his ownership of a copy is documented by his inscription on the end paper: “S. L. Clemens/ 21 - 5th Ave/ 1905.” The book passed to Mark Twain’s daughter, Clara, who sold it in 1951 from her Hollywood home with many other books from her father’s library.¹

Hana is the story of a patriotic Japanese woman who works as a nurse during the Russo-Japanese War and encounters two men as her patients, both of whom she had known before they were wounded in the war, one a Russian and the other an American. In order to extract a secret from the Russian that will aid the Japanese war effort, she reluctantly promises him her hand in marriage, knowing that her father can veto this promise according to Japanese custom, but condemning herself to a lifetime without marriage once her father refuses that union. She loves the American, but ever the patriot and honor-bound to keep her sacred vow, refuses his proposal. The angry Russian lures her to a remote spot (the suspense builds. . .) and tries to shoot her (Oh my! the suspense is unbearable. . .), but she is saved at the very last moment by her faithful little lap-dog who leaps up and deflects the Russian’s aim (you can’t make this stuff up; well, Murai can make it up, but not me. . .). The pistol drops to the ground (it ain’t over ’til it’s over!) and fires one final fateful bullet that drops the Russian to the ground, dead. This frees Hana to marry the American and they live happily ever-after. At the beginning of the story, Hana is depicted as chaste and shy, and she demurs to social custom. By the end of the novel she is still chaste and respectful of social custom, but she also speaks her mind, her self-confidence and strength have blossomed, and her resolute sense of honor and sacrifice imbue her with a patriotic and profound—if melodramatic—dignity.

Hana is an exemplar of the nationalistic romances of the Meiji period (1868-1912). These works were commonly political novels (*seiji-shosetsu*), a sub-genre of the broad genre of *mirai-ki*, novels that focused on the future character of the Japanese nation. In this rather late example of *mirai-ki*, this future is revealed in the character of a strong and beautiful woman, courted by competing “warriors”—a theme previously traced by Kyoko Kurita in two works written in the 1880s by Uchimura Gijo and Suehiro Tetcho.²

Gensai Murai was familiar with both Russian and American culture, being fluent in Russian, and having learned English during a one-year stay in San Francisco in the early 1880s. Whether Mark Twain was already familiar with Japanese culture is uncertain, but it seems likely that he would have been sent a copy of an informative book on Japanese culture and customs that was dedicated to him by its Australian compiler, then living in Japan. Emily Sophia Patton’s *Japanese Toposyturvydom* (1896), also in English and beauti-

fully illustrated, was a crepe-paper booklet that was distributed in the United States with the intent to educate Americans about Japanese culture and social customs.

The portions of *Hana* that would have especially caught Mark Twain's attention are the third chapter of the novel when Murai describes the young soldier who is spending his last moments with his family as he prepares to leave to fight, and the repeated references Murai makes to a manual on the ethical conduct of warfare, *The Pocket Monitor For Soldiers And Sailors* (Gunshi Tokuhon). This manual was not a fictional invention to advance the plot of the novel, but in fact was a popular manual that was carried by many Japanese soldiers during the Russo-Japanese War. Oddly, Murai never mentions that he was also the author of this manual.

When Mark Twain writes of "the proud fathers and mothers and sisters and sweet-hearts cheering them with voices choked with happy emotion" this echoes Murai's passages at pages 30-33, where Hana's father tells his son, "I feel proud to send you to this war, for I know you will fight bravely. . . for enlightenment, freedom and peace. . . a glorious battle and [to] establish the world-wide fame of our navy" and Hana reads to him from the soldier's manual and implores him to observe its rules for good health. A few lines further, Mark Twain says "the pastors preached devotion to flag and country and invoked the God of Battles," much like a passage in which Hana's father admonishes her brother that "Duty should be regarded more than life" before he invokes the ancestral samurai spirits and recalls the "warrior's resolve from olden times." These are just two examples, but the parallels of imagery and language in Murai's descriptions of Hana's brother's farewell to his family (28-37) and the first section of "The War-Prayer" before the stranger appears to rebuke to congregation, are numerous and striking.

The third chapter of Murai's romance, "The Farewell," (27-41), is full of choking emotion, patriotic rhetoric, manly bravado, and talk of noble duty, high honor and immortal glory. But it is also laced with references to the ethical conduct of war, and constant reminders of what the enemy may suffer. Unlike Mark Twain's congregation, no stranger must deliver the unspoken prayer; instead it is members of the family whose son is leaving for battle who gently but firmly remind each other that war is a brutal business and that the young soldier must be compassionate toward his enemy and behave honorably in both defeat or victory, reading him passages from Murai's manual on the humane treatment of captured soldiers, showing respect and giving protection to innocent women and children, and never destroying or stealing the enemy's property.

Not only do the rules set forth in Murai's manual highlight the horrors of war described by the stranger when he delivers that unspoken prayer, but his words also echo

those used by Murai when describing the actual battle scenes. The stranger says “help us to tear their soldiers to bloody shreds with our shells; help us cover their smiling fields with the pale forms of their patriot dead. . .,” recalling the scene where Murai (52) describes an enemy ship as “full of rents from the balls and shells, all splattered with human blood where the dead bodies were lying in a terrible condition.” A few lines later the stranger continues the unspoken prayer, saying “help us to drown the thunder of the guns with the shrieks of their wounded, writhing in pain; help us to lay waste their humble homes with a hurricane of fire; help us to wring the hearts of their unoffending widows with unavailing grief; help us to turn them out roofless with their little children to wander unfriended the wastes of their desolated land.” This passage stands in stark contrast to Murai’s lengthiest review (160-62) of his manual on the ethics of warfare. Murai’s manual instructs soldiers to “respect your honour at any cost. Do not plunder. . . respect the chastity of the women of the enemy. Commit no unseen crime. . . never treat them with the spirit of vengeance.” He even tells the story of a famous Japanese warrior who rescued a small child abandoned by the enemy on a battle field, and how this warrior continued his fight with the child under one arm and his sword in the other. The stranger’s invocation to “blight their lives, blast their hopes, protract their bitter pilgrimage, make heavy their steps. . .” contrasts sharply with a Japanese destroyer commander’s order to his men who loudly cheer after their torpedo has struck an enemy ship: he shames them into silence with the words, “Boys, don’t cheer, men are dying!”

In his preface to *Hana*, Murai says “the work of bloodshed is sin if the intention is malicious” and then illustrates his point by contrasting the example of the blood shed by the surgeon’s knife which brings “blessings to man.” Mark Twain contends that war itself is always a malicious shedding of blood, that there is always the unuttered but still heard prayer. Although Hana’s family hopes for victory and voices those hopes, the strict precepts laid out in Murai’s oft-quoted manual are a sober reminder of the potential (Mark Twain would say *inevitable*) cost of victory. In the first section of “The War-Prayer,” Mark Twain echoes the words and images used by Murai when Hana’s brother is saying his farewells; in the second half of “The War-Prayer” Murai’s manual provides a foundation for the text of Mark Twain’s heaven-sent messenger.

Notes

¹ Mark Twain’s copy of *Hana* is now in the collection of Kevin Mac Donnell, Austin, Texas.

² Presentation at the Seventh Asian Studies Conference Japan (ASCJ), Ichigaya Campus of Sophia University, June 21-22, 2003, session 22.