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Anti-War Statements in "The War-Prayer" and "The Private History of a Campaign That Failed"

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Mark Twain's response to the Philippine-American War, "The War-Prayer," clearly communicates that patriotism and religion are no justification for the inherent injustice of war. Twenty years earlier, Twain addressed that same injustice in the only account he

gave of his own military experience, as a militiaman resisting federal invasion of Missouri during the Civil War. In "The Private History of a Campaign That Failed," Twain partially fictionalizes the episode, but some of that imaginative invention has direct parallels to "The War-Prayer." The fictional stranger that Twain and his companions shoot and kill in "Private History" and the stranger that interrupts the church service in "The War-Prayer" both elicit specific and similar anti-war ideas, but the dissimilar ways in which they function in their respective stories reveal the differences in Twain's views of the Civil War and the Philippine-American War.

Although the two strangers are similar in the general sense that they both appear in Twain's writing about war, there are similarities present even in the specific words that Twain uses to describe them. Because the account of the murder in "Private History" is fictional, like the supernatural visit of the stranger in "The War-Prayer," both can be seen as devices used by Twain for the sole purpose of delivering anti-war messages. His description of each stranger includes only one color: white, for the hair of the messenger from God and the shirt of the murdered stranger ("War-Prayer" 1; "Private History" 180). This color choice suggests purity and innocence, and is appropriate because both strangers play the role of revealing the cruelty and corruption of wars by demonstrating the horrors of needless loss of life. In addition, the stranger in "The War-Prayer" is "pale even to ghastliness," which likens him to the corpse of the stranger in "Private History" (1). In his short descriptions, Twain also focuses in on the eyes of both strangers. In "Private History," right after the stranger is shot, Twain's younger self imagines "a reproachful look" from the dying man's "shadowy eyes," and concludes that "I would rather he had stabbed me than done that" (180). The messenger from God, in a similarly accusatory but much livelier manner, "survey[s] the spellbound audience with solemn eyes, in which [burn] an uncanny light" (2). The images of each stranger's eyes help to humanize them, which strengthens their identical messages: that there is no excuse for the mindless killing of other people, and no justification for the inevitable consequences of war. The focus on eyes is also significant because it is the blindness of his readers that Twain targets; in both stories, he hopes to open as many pairs of eyes as he can to the injustice of war. The messenger from God and the murdered man say the same thing in both stories, although one says it in words and the other through his influence upon the narrator.

Despite the striking similarities between the two strangers, the stories in which they appear are distinctly different. This reveals that although Twain held some consistent anti-war views between 1885 and 1905, he did differentiate between types of wars, and allowed that to shape his narratives. In "The War-Prayer," Twain presents the messenger

as the focal point of the piece and makes his message as powerful as possible, but in "Private History," a younger and more timid Twain does his best to bury the murdered man's message. Part of the ambiguity of "Private History" is due to the fact that it was written for a magazine series glorifying the war, and, given the expectations of his audience, Twain surely felt compelled to downplay his former Southern sympathies and his less-than-soldierly behavior (Camfield 449). Still, conspicuously missing from "Private History" is any mention of the patriotic or religious motivation for war that Twain derides thtough sarcasm in "The War-Prayer." It never describes "martial dreams" similar to those that lured the young volunteers of "The War-Prayer," with "visions of …the rushing charge…the flight of the foe…the surrender!," nor does it suggest that Twain had any aspirations of being a "bronzed hero" (1). Twain clearly had contempt for patriotic rhetoric like the preacher's sermon when he wrote "Private History," but he does not attack that rhetoric nearly as pointedly. His brief mention of a patriotic speech describes it as "adjective-piling, mixed metaphor, and windy declamation" that is mistaken for "eloquence" (168). When the Marion Rangers shoot the stranger, they act more out of fear than out of enthusiasm, showing that Twain is not criticizing the cause of the war but rather the consequences of war in general. "Private History" has suggestions of seriousness but its tone is generally lighthearted, and it uses humor to excuse Twain's behavior; there is little to suggest that Twain had strongly negative convictions about the causes of or motivations for the Civil War. When imperialistic wars like that in the Philippines developed later in Twain's life, though, he came to feel contempt for the blindly patriotic enthusiasm of imperialist nations, and expressed sympathy and support for native peoples who suffered oppression at the hands of outsiders (Camfield 639). Twain's main purpose in writing "The War-Prayer" was to speak out against the Philippine-American War, and the growth in his confidence as a writer and commentator is reflected in the straightforward tone of "The War-Prayer," which consistently treats patriotism with sarcasm and the stranger's message with respect. Although it also specifically targets imperialism, "The War-Prayer" contains in their full proportions the anti-war aspects of "Private History" that the younger Twain addressed briefly and ambiguously.

Considering that Twain wrote "Private History" at a relatively early point and "The War-Prayer" at a much more mature point in his career, the two works show a definite consistency of thought. Twain chose to put a clear, if somewhat obscured, anti-war statement in a piece written to accompany patriotic and triumphant accounts of the Civil War, and, two decades later, produced a distinctly anti-war story with unmistakable parallels to it. The clearly identifiable ties of the stranger in "Private History" to the messenger in "The

War-Prayer" attest to a deep and continuing awareness of the inhumanity involved in any kind of war. Far from weakening the correlation between the two strangers, the considerable differences between Twain's views of the Civil War and the Philippine-American War make the strangers' similarities all the more significant.

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