Oblivious Interpretation: Teaching Mark Twain's "The War-Prayer"
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**ABSTRACT:** Widely read simply as an anti-war polemic, Mark Twain's "The War-Prayer" also speaks to a crucial aim of literary education—learning to interpret texts critically—by satirizing its opposite: *oblivious interpretation*. Urging readers not to mistake interpretations for givens, this short story by one of the most canonical writers in American literature shows how to recognize interpretations as interpretations and, as a result, helps enable readers to choose among multiple options more carefully. Developing this indispensable aspect of critical thinking has implications for students not only with respect to the study of literature but also for life.

Mark Twain's "The War-Prayer" depicts a country jubilant on the eve of war. Patriotic celebrations fill the streets with flags, drums, bands, firecrackers, toy guns, marches, rallies, speeches, cheers, tears, applause, uniforms, young enlistees, and their loved ones bursting with pride. Except for a few dissenters quickly quieted, Twain writes, "in every breast burned the holy fire of patriotism" (156). He uses the word "holy" purposefully, for this triumphant militancy pervades even the churches, where "the pastors preached devotion to flag and country, and invoked the God of Battles" (156-57). Twain takes readers into one such church service. Congregants sing an apparently fitting hymn ("God the all-terrible!"), read "a war-chapter from the Old Testament," and listen in fervent agreement as the minister prays the story's eponymous war prayer. Stirring in both its emotion and eloquence, his long prayer asks "the ever-merciful and benignant Father of us all" for protection and victory in the coming battles (158).

But during the prayer, an "aged stranger" enters the church and approaches the podium. After the stunned minister steps aside, the stranger speaks a message he attributes to God. There is an "unspoken" side to the prayer that has just been prayed, he says. And he proceeds to explain to the congregation the "full import" of what they have asked for (158-59). In praying for victory, they have also prayed for defeat. If their side wins, the other loses. And since it's not a game marbles but war, losing means something quite definite, quite inescapable. Among other horrible things, the stranger informs them, this is what they have prayed: "O Lord, our God, help us to tear [the enemy's] soldiers to bloody shreds with our shells" and "turn [their widows] out roofless with their little children to wander unfriended the wastes of their desolated land in rags and hunger and thirst" (159).

Shorty after the stranger speaks these words, the story ends.
Twain's story plays two roles in my American Literature course. First, like Rebecca Harding Davis's *Life in the Iron Mills*, Frederick Douglass's *Narrative*, John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*, and other texts we read, this short story connects well to the central theme I have chosen for the course: "liberty and justice for all." Second, this story supports my central pedagogical purpose for the course: helping students develop skills and practices for critical interpretation. Before class on the day we discuss "The War-Prayer," students work to suss out the text's meaning for themselves in writing. For most of the course, we spend more time on students' interpretations than on mine. I want students to leave not merely with notes on someone else's readings—notes they will likely never use again—but rather with the ability to develop their own readings—an ability they can use not only with literature but in a wide range of professional, political, and personal contexts. As Robert Scholes writes, "Our job is not to produce 'readings' for students but to give them the tools for producing their own" (24). However, when we discuss "The War-Prayer," I do spend a bit of time presenting my own interpretation. For one, it doesn't hurt to model the process (as long as the modeling of interpretation doesn't take over the course, leaving too little time for students to practice on their own). Moreover, my interpretation of this story speaks directly to the skills I want students to develop.

On one level, the meaning of the story could hardly be clearer: "The War-Prayer" is an anti-war polemic. One reader goes so far as to say that the story has "no room for ambiguity, no opportunity to doubt [Twain's] intention" (Kiskis 95). Indeed, the story does communicate plainly and forcefully the message that war is much worse than anyone celebrating it might think. It would be hard to argue against that interpretation. Even though the text does not spell out this message directly, its searing, satirical commentary in this direction is unmistakable. At the same time, however, even while the story does have this striking straightforwardness to it, it also remains an aesthetic, literary text, which means, looked at more deeply, it will reveal a degree of complexity and ambiguity that cannot be reduced to one perspective, one explanation, one interpretation. Like all literature, this text yields a range of interpretations, if we read carefully, ask questions, approach from several angles. Moreover, Twain's well-known penchant for humor and irony and generally being incredibly clever suggests we ought not stop with a first impression, if we want more than a
superficial understanding. So, I tell my students, we need to push further. As Laura Wilder might put it, we need to dig deeper, past the "surface," into the depths of the text (35).

What, in addition to the clear anti-war message, is Twain doing in this story? In the scholarship on this text, suggestions abound. Does the story warn about the dangers of group thinking and the necessity of criticisms from an outside perspective (Kiskis 96)? Does it poke fun at "extreme self-righteousness" (Mong-Lan 99)? Does it encourage "empathy, and understanding the situation from another's point of view" (Donig 109)? Does it highlight "the denial of the other" (Zehr 87)? Does it testify to "the potentially disastrous consequences of silencing dissent" (Fishkin and Tatsumi 8)? Does it roast an "un-Christian version of Christianity" (Vaughan 39)? Does it skewer Christians for being "too often heedless of their religion's most significant teachings" (Ensor 539)? Does it criticize "the dangerous mix of religion and politics" (Gaskins 59)? Does it offer "a parable of the Philippine-American War" (Nagawara 30)? Does it mount an "anti-imperialist challenge to Christian justification for the War of 1898 [the Spanish-American War] and the rise of the American empire" (Blum 37)? Does it evince an "enduring belief in a beneficent Supreme Being" on Twain's part (Eutsey 53)? Does it present, rather than an anti-war polemic, "a reflection on the failure of anti-war polemics to persuade" (Claybaugh 68)? Does it make a case for reforming the Anti-Imperialist League (Dooley 57)?

All of these are convincing readings, differing takes that are not necessarily mutually exclusive but in tension with one another, glimpses into the text from different vantage points, perspectives arrived at by emphasizing or connecting different aspects of the text or by looking at the same aspects under different slants of light. Likewise, under yet another slant of light, I also see the story differently. While all of these takes have merit—and critical interpretation, I tell my students, requires that we be able to see merit in multiple interpretations, whether contradictory or complimentary—I suggest they miss a central aspect of the story. The story does critique war, religion, patriotism, lack of empathy, and disregard for the other. But an additional, crucial strand runs through its treatment of all of these, the theme of interpretation. My interpretation proposes that interpretation itself lies at the heart of this story. Mark Twain's "The War-Prayer" satirizes uncritical interpretation, offering examples (and ridicule) of precisely the opposite of what I would like my students to learn to do.
The story proceeds through a series of interpretations. The characters in the story interpret a hymn, the Bible, the prayer, and war itself. In their interpretations, the hymn speaks to God's war-like character, the Bible indicates God supports this present war, the prayer shows they desire only good things from the "Father of us all," and war itself is "glory!" (158). Of course, none of these interpretations are critical in any way. The people in the story do not pay careful attention to the texts themselves. For instance, the hymn they sing in support of the war—Henry F. Chorley's "In Time of War"—may invoke "God the all-terrible!" but, in lines not quoted in the story and, as that omission implies, not considered carefully by the congregation, the hymn quickly begs, "Give to us pardon and peace, O Lord" (qtd. in Ensor 538). The people ignore these words in the hymn, seeing, as Allison Ensor observes, "no meaning for themselves as they sing" (539). Likewise, they do not ask any probing questions, consider other possible interpretations, or weigh competing evidence. They do not identify assumptions; take into account historical, literary, or critical contexts; or probe the space between form and content. They certainly do not make use of any of the branches of philosophy or ethics available to them at the time (Enlightenment thinking, just war theory, pacifism, etc.) to consider the meaning of the texts more fully or in light of other perspectives. Most fundamentally of all, they do not even see—appear unable to even see—their interpretations as interpretations. Instead, they recognize only a single possible meaning: that this war is good, glorious, and sanctioned by God. They take this single meaning as obvious, self-evident, literally incontestable. They take it so for granted that even their taking of it for granted becomes invisible. It isn't an interpretation. It just is.

The stranger in the story takes on the uncritical aspect of the people's interpretation directly. Yes, he uses violent imagery to convey an anti-war message. Yes, he ironically juxtaposes that imagery with invocations of God's love and mercy to criticize the marriage of war and religion. But his actual words have more nuance to them. The stranger does not tell the people to change what they've asked for or to want peace rather than war. Instead, he tells them to think about what they've asked for from an alternative perspective and to make a decision about whether they still want that only "after" they've done so (159, emphasis added). He explains, the pastor's prayer "asks for more than he who utters it is aware of—except he pause and think" (159, emphasis added). Should they pause and think, they will realize it has two meanings, "one uttered, the other not" (159). It is the task of critical
interpretation to dig deeper and examine implicit, unuttered meanings, other possible interpretations. And God has sent the stranger, the stranger claims, to help the people do just that. To put it another way, God has sent a literary scholar, a teacher of literature and interpretation, to help people see what they what they have missed seeing. The stranger declares, "I am commissioned of God to put into words the other part of [the prayer]—that part which the pastor—and also you in your hearts—fervently prayed silently. And ignorantly and unthinkingly? God grant that it was so!" (159).

It is only after framing what he has to say in precisely this way—framing it as the "unpacking" (as Nancy Chick might put it) of unconsidered dimensions of the text—that the stranger goes on to give his jarring message, quoted above, about what war will mean to its victims. And, after he has spoken his message, it is with this framing in mind that he "waits" for the congregation to decide whether they still want to pray what they have prayed, having now heard an alternative interpretation (160).

Just as the theme of interpretation puts the stranger's message in a new light, it also helps us understand the audience's peculiar response. Twain tells us earlier in the story, "the half dozen rash spirits that ventured to disapprove of the war and cast a doubt upon its righteousness straightway got such a stern and angry warning that for their personal safety's sake they quickly shrank out of sight and offended no more in that way" (157). We can assume the congregation would respond similarly if the stranger's message simply condemned the war. But they respond quite differently. They sit there in silence. They do nothing. Though they know just what to do with dissent within the framework of a single interpretation, this alternative interpretation baffles them. As Helen Lock writes, they fail "even to understand the stranger's point" (74, emphasis added). They do not even recognize that they have been presented an alternative interpretation. So they dismiss the stranger outright. In the story's final words, "It was believed afterwards, that the man was a lunatic, because there was no sense in what he said" (160). The people cannot refute what they cannot compute. They respond not as if to disagreement but as if to absurdity. Alternative interpretations are not wrong; they are unthinkable, literally insane.

Because the people cannot see their own interpretation as an interpretation, they cannot consider alternative interpretations—or alternative actions. So the war goes on, with disastrous consequences. While Twain purposefully avoids setting the story in a specific
historical context, allowing it to speak to war in many contexts, he does write the story in response to the United States’ invasion of the Philippines, which ended the First Philippine Republic (established after the hard-fought independence from three hundred years of Spanish colonization) and began the United States’ occupation of the Philippines. In this unprovoked war, the United States military committed brutal atrocities against the Filipino people. Up to twenty thousand Filipino soldiers and, largely from disease, up to two hundred fifty thousand Filipino civilians died in this war. Five or six thousand soldiers from the United States died as well. In addition to being singularly unjustified and catastrophic, the conquest was waged with gleeful brutality. One officer, General Jacob H. Smith, ordered that any Filipino over the age of ten years old be killed, giving instructions in language that rises to the level of Twain’s but without Twain’s irony: “I want no prisoners. I wish you to kill and burn; the more you kill and burn, the better it will please me . . . The interior of Samar must be made a howling wilderness” (qtd. In "President"). In "The War-Prayer," Twain shows readers that the atrocities of war are not caused simply by patriotism, greed, racism, etc. They are also justified through uncritical interpretation. The history of the United States repeatedly underscores how pressing this lesson is, including, more recently, with the unprovoked invasion of Iraq, which has led to the deaths of more than half a million Iraqis, mostly citizens, as well as the deaths of thousands of soldiers from the United States (Burnham et al.).

I would like my students to see that, in extreme instances like those Twain’s story depicts, critical or uncritical interpretation quite literally means life or death. Of course, I also make clear that the stakes are smaller most of the time. At the other end of things from war—that is, with romance—critical interpretation of, say, body language during a first date or text messages sent afterward can lead to love lost or won. Likewise, critical interpretation of the fine print in a contract can lead to better financial decisions. The ability to dig below the surface, ask questions, consider multiple possibilities, weight evidence—the ability to interpret critically—has countless political, professional, personal, educational, intellectual and, of course, literary uses.

In life, I tell my students, we often need to decide what to do or how to understand things yet find ourselves in situations where the correct option may not be clear or where what appears clearly correct may not actually be the best route: whether to spend the
evening with friends or get an early start on that research project, whether to marry Jordan or Jamie or no one, whether to have one kid or more or none, whether to take this promotion now or finish out a long term project first, whether to accept a certain business proposal or wait for a better offer, whether to go to graduate school, whether to take out a loan for a house, how to deal with depression, whether to vaccinate, how to respond to scientists’ findings about global warming, what to do in the face of extreme global poverty, how to understand a mother’s early death to cancer, what to make of one’s purpose in life, and so on. The ability to interpret texts and situations critically can help students in many ways. In some cases critical interpretation can save lives; in other cases it can save money; in other cases it can save face; and in still other cases it may not save anything but may help us understand the meaning of loss. In short, I tell students, critical interpretation helps us to make better decisions, to understand other people’s decisions, and to understand life in a deeper, more nuanced, more meaningful way.

In the classical schemes of intellectual development proposed by William Perry and by Mary Field Belenky and colleagues, students often enter college with ways of thinking and knowing marked by dualism, received knowledge, or even silence. These early stages correspond to what I am calling oblivious interpretation, the way of interpretation to which Twain’s stranger responds. Part of the purpose of a college education, particularly in the study of literature, is to help students develop more sophisticated ways of thinking and knowing. If oblivious interpretation takes place when one makes an interpretation without realizing it, then the first step is to see interpretation as interpretation, to recognize that we do not simply pick up meaning already clearly there in the text but actively make meaning with the text. Of course, to really learn this, students must do it for themselves, with guidance, practice, and feedback. But as I work to give students those, I also offer, by way of illustration, this interpretation-focused interpretation of "The War-Prayer." This compelling text shows the dangers of oblivious interpretation and the importance of critical interpretation. With the help of this story, I teach students that, if we pause and think, we may be less likely to invade and more likely to understand.
Works Cited


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