

“It was a mistake”

Abolitionism, Revision, and Mark Twain’s “A Scrap of Curious History”

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Abstract

Mark Twain did not publish any significant reflections on abolitionism in his lifetime, yet he did leave in his papers “A Scrap of Curious History,” an unfinished attempt to write fiction about abolitionist activity in antebellum Missouri that was initiated not by memory but by his witnessing a backlash to anarchist uprisings in France in 1894. His biographer Albert Bigelow Paine published a revised and expurgated version of “A Scrap of Curious History” in Harper’s *Monthly* a few years after Clemens’s death, but existing commentary on the sketch has been minimal and has relied on Paine’s bowdlerized text, not on the surviving manuscript. Paine’s changes—including his writing a conclusion to the piece—deviated from Mark Twain’s intentions to write a dramatic sketch, ponderously open-ended and blunt, that examined the anxieties underlying radical politics and their relation to justice, terrorism, and social progress.

Keywords: *abolition, abolitionism, antislavery, terrorism, manuscript study, publishing*

It is curious that Mark Twain did not publish any significant reflections on abolitionism in his lifetime. That could be attributed to several factors, one being the fact that for most of his life he experienced not slavery and abolitionism but Reconstruction and its disastrous aftermath.¹ His public commentary on abolitionism was uneven and apparently noncommittal, despite his stated opposition to slavery in later writings. In an August 24, 1853, letter to his mother, Jane (published in the *Hannibal Journal* on September 5, 1853), from Syracuse, New York, he describes seeing the city’s courthouse and recalls the

“chains and companies of soldiers” guarding it from “the infernal abolitionists” who were attempting to free a slave there in 1851 (*L1 4*).² As a more mature correspondence writer, he concluded in 1869 that Petroleum V. Nasby’s lecture “Cussed Be Canaan” was “a fair and logical argument against slavery, and is the pleasantest to listen to I have ever heard upon that novel and interesting subject.” Yet he also criticized Nasby’s hostility toward democracy.³ He added in a letter to Olivia Langdon that “it may seem strange to you, but honestly I was perfectly fascinated with Nasby’s lecture, & find no flaw in it.”⁴ By 1870, he had married Olivia, whose abolitionist father Jervis had helped Frederick Douglass escape slavery and funded former slaves’ education.⁵ After the war, Clemens also befriended former abolitionists such as James Redpath, Thomas K. Beecher, and Isabella Beecher Hooker.⁶

Even in the rare instances when the political movement of abolitionism appears in Twain’s work, it is filtered through hindsight and comes with subtle hints. Young Clemens’s figure of the “infernal” abolitionist becomes “low-down” in Chapter 8 of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, when Huck meets Jim on Jackson’s Island, and swears secrecy as to Jim’s whereabouts: “Well, I did. I said I wouldn’t, and I’ll stick to it. Honest *injun*, I will. People would call me a low-down abolitionist and despise me for keeping mum—but that don’t make no difference. I ain’t agoing to tell, and I ain’t agoing back there, anyways” (52–53). Later, in Chapter 16, when Jim assumes the raft is approaching Cairo, he suggests that “they’d get an abolitionist to go and steal” his family members if his plans to buy his family’s freedom were to be foiled (124). In the next paragraph Huck says, “It froze me to hear such talk,” appalled by Jim’s anticipation of freedom. Also, as the Mark Twain Project edition notes, E. W. Kemble’s illustration of Jim in Chapter 13 (“Jim and the Ghost”) alludes to the famous image employed by the abolitionist movement, “Am I Not a Man and a Brother?” (395–96).⁷

One intriguing abolitionist resonance in the fiction comes from *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court* (1888), in which the political feasibility of ending slavery is treated with ambivalence. After Hank has been appointed the Boss for the King, he says, “If I lived and prospered I would be the death of slavery, that I was resolved upon; but I would try to fix it so that when I became its executioner it should be by command of the nation” (200). Later in the novel, when Hank and the King travel the country together disguised as peasants, and are captured and sold as slaves, Hank asks the King if their experience of slavery’s horrors should lead to its abolishment. Hank relays that the King’s “answer was as sharp as before, but it was music this time; I shouldn’t ever wish to hear pleasanter, though the profanity was not good, being awkwardly put together,

and with the crash-word almost in the middle instead of at the end, where of course it ought to have been” (353). Hank never shares the King’s answer; he only describes its effect. That the “command of the nation” does not match the urgency of “the end, where of course it ought to have been,” insinuates that the population is not yet ready for change. This ambivalence reflects Samuel Clemens’s attitudes toward his beloved home region and his slave-owning relatives even as he came to vigorously oppose Southern nostalgia, Reconstruction failures, and other injustices around the world. Still, nothing above suggests outright support for abolitionism as a model for a political cause.

Given the apparent tension in Clemens between abolitionist and consensus politics, it is even more intriguing that he did leave in his surviving papers “A Scrap of Curious History,” an abandoned attempt to write fiction about abolitionist activities in antebellum Missouri that shows how cruelty, vanity, and ignorance are key features of the “command of the nation.” The sketch is significant not just because it is Twain’s only piece of imaginative writing about abolitionists in Missouri, but it also subtly exposes the overlapping anxieties of political progress, terrorism, and flawed justice in times of polarization. All of these anxieties were also addressed—independently of Twain’s privately writing about them—in the work of other major authors around this time period, from Fyodor Dostoyevsky’s *Demons* (1871–72) to Henry James’s *Princess Casamassima* (1886) to Joseph Conrad’s *Secret Agent* (1907). These worries were as meaningful in antebellum Missouri as they were in Europe and in the Jim Crow South at the end of the nineteenth century.

Shortly after Clemens’s death, his biographer Albert Bigelow Paine revised the sketch, added a conclusion, and published it in the October 1914 issue of *Harper’s Monthly*. It was reprinted in the collection *What Is Man? and Other Essays* (1917) and in Charles Neider’s *Complete Essays* (1962), but it was not included in Louis Budd’s collection of Twain’s prose published by the Library of America in 1992. Commentary on the sketch has been scant and has relied on the bowdlerized text in *Harper’s*, not on the surviving manuscript. As a result, critics have tended to oversimplify the “anti-abolitionist” view of an “essay” that was actually an unfinished, fictional, and ambiguous sketch that was modified posthumously during the publication process.⁸ Given that Twain’s intentions for publishing “A Scrap of Curious History” are not known, it is necessary to investigate the unfinished manuscript as he had left it.⁹ The text published in *Harper’s* deviates from Twain’s concept of the piece as a dramatic and ponderous sketch with unresolved contradictions.

Clemens wrote “A Scrap of Curious History” while visiting France in the summer of 1894, after witnessing a nationalist backlash against recent anarchist violence. On June 23, Clemens and his family arrived in La Bourboule-les-Bains, roughly 150 miles from Lyon, to take the restorative thermal baths (Fears 22). On the following day, the Italian anarchist Sante Geronimo Caserio assassinated Marie-François-Sadi Carnot, the president of France, in Lyon. This was the climax of anarchist violence in France dating back to François Ravachol’s murders in 1892, for which he was executed, and which inspired a series of anarchist reprisals. Shortly after the news of the assassination broke, a mob gathered outside the Clemenses’ hotel and sought to round up the Italian waiters working there, according to Clemens’s June 29, 1894, letter to H. H. Rogers, “proposing to hammer them; but the landlord refused to give them up, & sent them to the upper story for safety. . . . Toward midnight the mob came around under our windows again and began to smash windows on the floor below and there was also the crash of smashing woodwork” (*MTHHR* 68; *UCCL* 04748). The mob continued throughout the night with threats and cries of “A bès les Italiens!” demanding that the Italians leave by the next night.

Roughly a week after the assassination, Olivia offered her own view of the events in a letter to Alice Hooker Day, pointing out how the mob

broke one or two windows, hit one lady with a stone breaking the window in her room, making a terrible noise, singing the Marseillaise &c, &c. Every one in the house was up until a late hour and many were much frightened. It seemed as if we might be living in the time of Marie Antoinette, for a few hours. . . . At the time of the riot there were only two policemen in the town. The next night they had eleven lodged in the hotel and there was no disturbance. (MS: CtHSD; *UCCL* 10599)

Clemens wrote his thoughts on anarchists on five pages shortly after the unsettling scene. Although untitled, the screed is signed “S. L. C. | La Bourboule-les-Bains | June 25, 1894.” In it, he argues that “the source of the [anarchists’] insanity was hunger & thirst after notoriety,” and suggests that one of them was “chagrined when he thought he was likely to be sent to the obscurity of the prison or the galleys like a vulgar blatherskite, instead of to a showy martyrdom on the scaffold like a hero” (MS: CU-MARK [DV 419]).¹⁰ He then directs his ire toward greedy newspapermen and “disordered minds” engaging “upon the enterprise of buying renown with a bomb or a knife.” Reflecting further on policies of deterrence, he wrote:

This ought to be easy to do, if, as I believe, the . . . mania has its origin in a vulgar vanity; for vanity cannot stand humiliation and ridicule. The man who will kill a chief magistrate for glory's sake will think twice before he will do it for humiliation's sake. He would not do it with genuine alacrity if he knew he would have to spend the rest of his life on exhibition in the Place de la Concorde clad in the short skirts and pink tights of a ballet girl, with a parasol in his hand and the passers-by privileged to pelt him with over-due eggs. The stocks were a valuable institution; their value lay in the fact that they inflicted humiliation. . . . The inflated anarchist seeking a gaudy martyrdom, with pictures of himself in the papers, would hardly apply there.

The ideas of “gaudy martyrdom” and vanity are central to what he wrote soon afterward, “A Scrap of Curious History.”

The surviving manuscript of “A Scrap of Curious History” is apparently unfinished (Fig. 1). As was sometimes his practice after Twain's death, Paine partnered with Frederick Duneka of Harper and Brother's and revised the manuscript for publication in *Harper's Monthly* (Fig. 2).¹¹ Paine struck out almost three hundred words from this roughly three-thousand-word sketch, and *Harper's* made many additional alterations. In some instances the piece was copyedited to suit either Paine's taste or the house style at *Harper's*, but in other cases, Twain's words were suppressed. It is not yet known exactly why Paine wanted this potentially controversial manuscript to be published and changed certain aspects of its material—including his decision to revise the piece and add a conclusion to it. To his credit, Paine (along with the Mark Twain Company and *Harper's*) offered readers a piece on an important subject that Twain himself had not been able to see through. What is certain is that Paine was both trying to control a literary legacy and to capitalize on the author's death by bringing out as much unpublished work as possible, and in so doing, taking editorial liberties.

“A Scrap of Curious History” begins by connecting the recent unrest in France to unsettling times in antebellum Missouri:

Marion City, on the Mississippi river, in the State of Missouri—a village; time, 1845. La Bourboule-les-Bains, France—a village; time, the end of June, 1894. I was in the one village in that early time; I am in the other now. These times & places are sufficiently wide apart, yet today I have the strange sense of being thrust back into that Missourian village & of reliving certain stirring days that I lived there so long ago.¹²

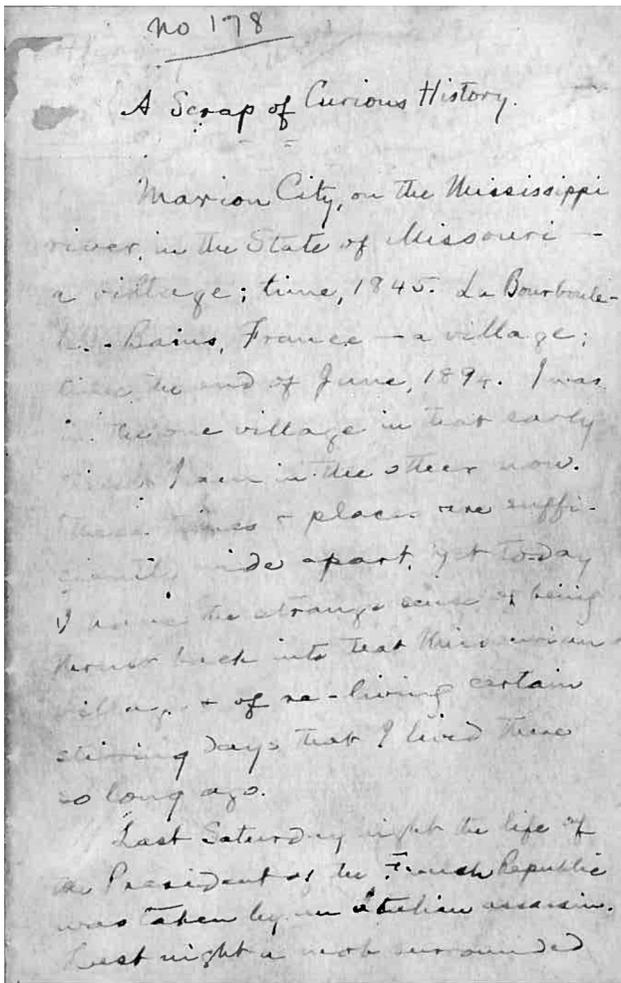


FIG. 1 The first page of the manuscript (ca. 1894). Image courtesy of the Mark Twain Papers, Bancroft Library, UC Berkeley.

A brief summary of the assassination of Sadi Carnot, the ensuing mob violence, and the “heavy punishment of a public sort” of the leaders of the mob initiates the trope of the “mistake,” “which was at first made in the Missourian village half a century ago. The mistake was repeated, & repeated—just as France is doing ⁱⁿ these latter months—but at last the Missourians grew wise & changed their policy.”¹³ The essential—and indeed the most curious—crux of the sketch is captured by the next analogy: “In our village we had our Ravachols,¹⁴ our Henrys, our Vaillants; & in a humble way our Cesario—I hope I have spelt his name wrong.¹⁵ Fifty years ago we passed through, in all essentials, what France

A Scrap of Curious History

(Written at La Bourboule-les-Bains, France, June, 1894)

BY MARK TWAIN



MARION CITY, on the Mississippi River, in the State of Missouri—a village; time, 1845. La Bourboule-les-Bains, France—a village; time, the end of June, 1894. I was in the one village in that early time; I am in the other now. These times and places are sufficiently wide apart, yet to-day I have the strange sense of being thrust back into that Missourian village and of re-living certain stirring days that I lived there so long ago.

Last Saturday night the life of the President of the French Republic was taken by an Italian assassin. Last night a mob surrounded our hotel, shouting, howling, singing the "Marseillaise," and pelting our windows with sticks and stones; for we have Italian waiters, and the mob demanded that they be turned out of the house instantly—to be drubbed, and then driven out of the village. Everybody in the hotel remained up until far into the night, and experienced the several kinds of terror which one reads about in books which tell of night attacks by Italians and by French mobs: the growing roar of the oncoming crowd; the arrival, with rain of stones and crash of glass; the withdrawal to rearrange plans—followed by a silence ominous, threatening, and harder to bear than even the active siege and the noise. The landlord and the two village policemen stood their ground, and at last the mob was persuaded to go away and leave our Italians in peace. To-day four of the ringleaders have been sentenced to heavy punishment of a public sort—and are become local heroes, by consequence.

That is the very mistake which was at first made in the Missourian village half a century ago. The mistake was repeated

and repeated—just as France is doing in these latter months.

In our village we had our Ravochals, our Henrys, our Vaillants; and in a humble way our Cesario—I hope I have spelled this name wrong. Fifty years ago we passed through, in all essentials, what France has been passing through during the past two or three years, in the matter of periodical frights, horrors, and shudderings.

In several details the parallels are quaintly exact. In that day, for a man to speak out openly and proclaim himself an enemy of negro slavery was simply to proclaim himself a madman. For he was blaspheming against the holiest thing known to a Missourian, and could not be in his right mind. For a man to proclaim himself an anarchist in France, three years ago, was to proclaim himself a madman—he could not be in his right mind.

Now the original old first blasphemer against any institution profoundly venerated by a community is quite sure to be in earnest; his followers and imitators may be humbugs and self-seekers, but he himself is sincere—his heart is in his protest.

Robert Hardy was our first abolitionist—awful name! He was a journeyman cooper, and worked in the big cooper-shop belonging to the great pork-packing establishment which was Marion City's chief pride and sole source of prosperity. He was a New-Englander, a stranger. And, being a stranger, he was of course regarded as an inferior person—for that has been human nature from Adam down—and of course, also, he was made to feel unwelcome, for this is the ancient law with man and the other animals. Hardy was thirty years old, and a bachelor; pale, given to reverie and reading. He was reserved, and seemed to prefer the isolation which had fallen to his lot.

FIG. 2 The first page of the sketch in *Harper's Monthly* (1914).

has been passing through during the past two or three years, in the matter of periodical frights, horrors & shudderings." It is not clear what he means: how do the "shudderings" of militant American abolitionists compare to the actions and principles of European anarchists? In a characteristic kind of irony served up by Mark Twain, he claims that "the parallels are quaintly exact," because both abolitionists and anarchists were initially considered insane, and blasphemers against polite society. This quaint phrase suggests the first of several signs of an

unreliable narrator, but it is also clear that the anarchists and abolitionists he has in mind also share the common trait of vanity and violence that Clemens had already personally decried. This trope of linking disparate groups to make a political point can also be found in two pieces written shortly afterward, “To the Person Sitting in Darkness” (1901) and the “United States of Lyncherdom” (also written in 1901 but published posthumously in 1923).

The narrator then describes the arrival of an “original old first blasphemor,” a journeyman cooper from New England called Robert Hardy. Foreshadowing the problems that eventually beset the town, he adds that “his followers & imitators are likely to be humbugs¹⁶ & self-seekers, but he himself is sincere, his heart is in his protest.” Already treated as an oddity and outsider (“being a stranger he was of course regarded as an inferior person”), he makes matters worse for himself by publicly proclaiming himself an “ABOLITIONIST” (“awful name!” the narrator exclaims). Twain capitalized the word throughout, whereas the published version in *Harper’s* lowercased it.

After the reserved and bookish Hardy publicly declares himself an abolitionist, “the town was paralyzed with astonishment; then it broke into a fury of rage & swarmed toward the cooper-shop to lynch Hardy. But the Methodist minister made a powerful speech to them & stayed their hands. He proved to them that Hardy was insane & not responsible for his words; that no man *could* be sane & utter such words.” This foreshadows the angelic stranger in “The War-Prayer” who is deemed a “lunatic” by the minister and congregation, which cannot grasp the truth in his homily that war creates more suffering than it is worth. The minister in the “Scrap” temporarily saves Hardy, which allows Hardy to make anti-slavery speeches to the townspeople: “Being insane, he was allowed to go on talking.” They were appropriately entertained, and did not heed Hardy’s warning that “rivers of blood” will eventually flow due to their sin of supporting slavery.

Hardy’s prophecy comes true when he murders the town constable, who attempted to intercept Hardy as he was ferrying an escaped slave into Illinois. The narrator details the sensationalism of the enterprising local journal editor who covers the murder and ensuing trial. When the trial concludes, Twain

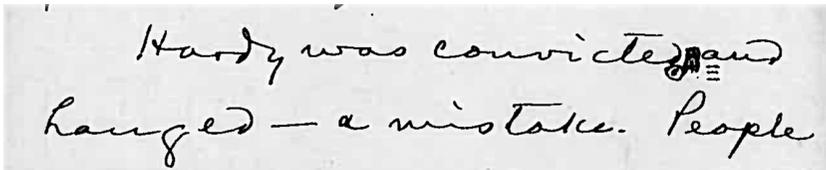


FIG. 3 A close-up of Twain’s revision, which Paine did not follow, on page 15 of the manuscript. Image courtesy of the Mark Twain Papers, Bancroft Library, UC Berkeley.

originally wrote that “Hardy was convicted; and hanged—a mistake.” He then substituted a period for the semicolon and marked “and” to be capitalized, which should have rendered the final wording as “convicted. And hanged—a mistake.” In a regrettable mistake of editing, Paine chose to print “Hardy was convicted, and hanged—a mistake.” In his ingenious manuscript revision, which separated the conviction and the hanging with a full stop, Twain emphasized that the execution—not the conviction—was the mistake (Fig. 3).

The narrator then recalls how the hanging combined entertainment, the socialization of capital punishment, as well as an economic opportunity: “People came from miles around to see the hanging; they brought cakes & cider, & also the women & children, & made a picnic of the matter. It was the largest crowd the village had ever seen. The rope that hanged Hardy was eagerly bought up, in inch-samples, for everybody wanted a memento of the memorable event. Full particulars went into the paper.”¹⁷ This satire recalls Injun Joe’s funeral at the end of *Tom Sawyer*, when “people flocked there in boats and wagons from the town and from all the farms and hamlets for seven miles around; they brought their children, and all sorts of provisions, and confessed that they had had almost as satisfactory a time at the funeral as they could have had at the hanging” (240).

Up to this point Paine’s interventions were minimal, but as the story transitions into the second part, Paine made a change that significantly altered the implications of the published version. In the manuscript, Twain inserted a section divider and began the first paragraph, “Thus ended the first act, & the curtain went down.” Paine deleted both the section divider and that sentence, effectively removing the clearest trace of Twain’s frame of dramatic allegory (Fig. 4).

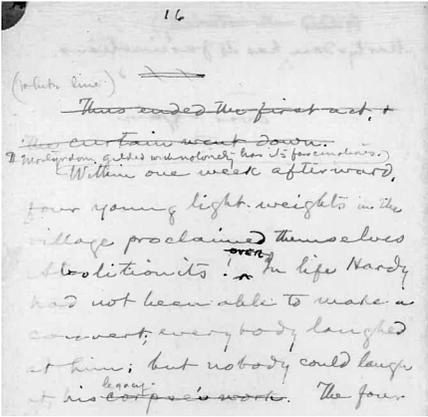


FIG. 4 The top of page 16 of the manuscript, which shows Paine’s deletion of Mark Twain’s section break and opening sentence in pencil. Image courtesy of the Mark Twain Papers, Bancroft Library, UC Berkeley.

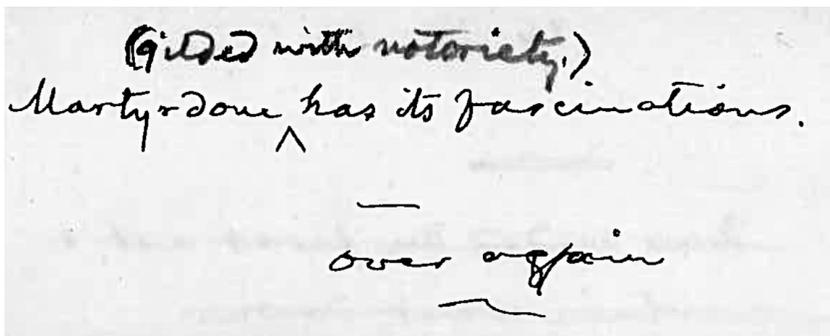


FIG. 5 The back of the page, which shows Mark Twain's original addition of "Martyrdom (gilded with notoriety) has its fascinations" (which Paine then slightly modified and moved to the beginning of the paragraph). Image courtesy of the Mark Twain Papers, Bancroft Library, UC Berkeley.

What Twain intended as the second "act" of the "Scrap" focuses on four young men (well, "light-weights") who proclaim themselves abolitionists within a week of Hardy's execution. Twain added a phrase that echoed Clemens's own personal commentary about the French situation: "[^]Martyrdom [^](gilded with notoriety)[^] has its fascinations[^]" (Fig. 5).¹⁸ The narrator reminds us that Hardy "had not been able to make a convert; everybody laughed at him; but nobody could laugh at his corpse's work."¹⁹ Hailing from good families, the young swaggering abolitionists become more secretive, wearing black robes, holding secret meetings, and referring to Hardy as the Martyr. The townspeople's fear of the abolitionists also changes: "A few men of character & grit woke up out of the nightmare of fear which had been stupefying their faculties, & began to discharge scorn & scoffings at themselves & the community for enduring this child's play; & at the same time they proposed to end it straightway. Everybody felt an uplift; life was breathed into their ~~oppressed~~ dead spirits; their courage rose, & they began to feel like men again." Twain's original wording of "oppressed" suggests his initial (and ironic) sense of making the men more sympathetic, whereas "dead" aptly captures their inhumane impulses. Then the Presbyterian minister, who had already denounced the young abolitionists, warns in a sermon "to use his pulpit in the public interest again now. On the morrow He had revelations to make, he said—secrets of the dreadful Society." "He" was lowercased in the published version—an important departure from the manuscript that transfers God's judgment to the clergyman's. "Society" was also lowercased in *Harper's*, in effect minimizing Twain's irony. The revelations never come, because that night the clergyman and his slave are killed by a bomb explosion in his home. Another terrific (as in severe and terrifying) form of irony: the abolitionists accidentally kill a slave and do not seem to repent.

The town is paralyzed with fear until Will Joyce, one of the young abolitionists, admits that he was the bomber. In what reads like a rewrite of Clemens's own comments about the anarchists in his unpublished document from June 25, 1894, the narrator suggests that Joyce was not motivated by virtue:

Plainly he was not minded to be robbed of his glory. He made his proclamation, & stuck to it. Stuck to it, & insisted upon a trial. Here was an ominous thing; here was a new & peculiarly formidable terror. For a motive was revealed here which society could not hope to deal with successfully—*vanity*, thirst for notoriety. If men were going to kill for notoriety's sake, & to win the glory of newspaper renown, a big trial ^&^ a showy execution, what possible invention of man could discourage or deter them?

Joyce eventually provides his testimony to a grand jury, part of which was not included in the *Harper's* version:

He gave a full account of the assassination; he furnished even the minutest particulars: how he turned up such-&-such a lane; went down such-&-such a street; noticed lights in such-&-such a house; met such-&-such late people at such-&-such points; was barked at by so-&-so's dog. He gave all the details of his procedure at the preacher's house;²⁰ how he deposited his keg of powder & laid his train—from the house to such-&-such a spot; how George Ronalds ^& Henry Hart^ came along just then, smoking, & he borrowed Hart's cigar & fired the train with it, shouting "Down with all slave-tyrants!" & how Hart & Ronalds made no effort to arrest capture him, but ran away, & had never come forward to testify yet.

It might seem that Paine's excision of parts of these passages was due to the repetition of such-and-such phrases, but that leaves out Twain's additional evidence of the bomber's cruel premeditation, which is balanced against the troubling detail that two witnesses were too fearful to intervene, and, later, to come forward to report the crime. One of several subtly ambiguous moments in the sketch, the situation at once reveals sympathy for the two witnesses who were understandably frozen by the horrendous violence, as well as their cowardice to stop the perpetrator who was nevertheless supporting a virtuous cause. It is a thought experiment about the problem of cruel calculus in political radicalism.

The last few pages of the original manuscript have the most significant revisions by both Twain and Paine. The narrator says that the newspapers again try to sensationalize—and capitalize on—Joyce's trial: "The trial was put in the

paper, with biography, ^and^ large portrait; portraits of the family, portrait of the birth-place, portrait of the dog that barked at Joyce that night, view of the explosion, view of the modest funeral, view of a midnight pilgrimage, & an opulent abundance of²¹ other slanderous & insane pictures, & the edition sold beyond imagination.”

At this point, Twain had initially intended to end the story with a perfunctory description of the hanging, but instead he crossed that out and added more detail on four of the last five pages:

When Will Joyce had been a glittering hero for two months, & the talk of all the region round about, ~~he was hanged in front of two thousand people—another mistake—& went to his death the proudest & happiest man in the country; for he was famous, there~~ a change came over his attitude: he began to protest against being hanged. And from protests he proceeded to threats. His life-lease was shortening fast. He began to get anxious; anxious & distressed. Evidently martyrdom was losing some of its charms for him. Glory was a fine thing, & he had acquired it; but death—plainly death was coming to look like a pretty serious thing.

He did not beg for life; no, he demanded it; & not calmly, but insolently & insultingly; & always with threats. The rest of the Society followed his lead. They sent ~~threatening~~ letters to the sheriff every day, warning him that if he executed the court’s sentence upon Joyce he should certainly die.

Paine struck out the two paragraphs above—more sentences that complicate Twain’s story by reflecting the pathos of the condemned man, and representing a reversal of Twain’s initial intention to have Joyce die happy (Fig. 6 & 7).

The spectacle of Joyce’s execution “was a fine & picturesque thing,” drawing a huge crowd who consumed treats and some of whom purchased seats with good views of the execution. Waiting on the scaffold, Joyce recites “a furious & fantastic & denunciatory speech” with “imposing passages of school-boy eloquence in it.” This gives him “a reputation on the spot as an orator, & the name, later, in the Society’s records, of the ‘Martyr Orator.’ He went to his death breathing slaughter and charging his Society to ‘avenge his murder.’ If he knew anything of human nature he knew that to plenty of young fellows present in that great crowd he was a grand hero—and enviably situated.”

The story then abruptly ends with a two-sentence paragraph: “He was hanged. It was a mistake.” *Harper’s* retained that phrase, but it did not end the story. Paine penciled in a conclusion, which appeared in print as:

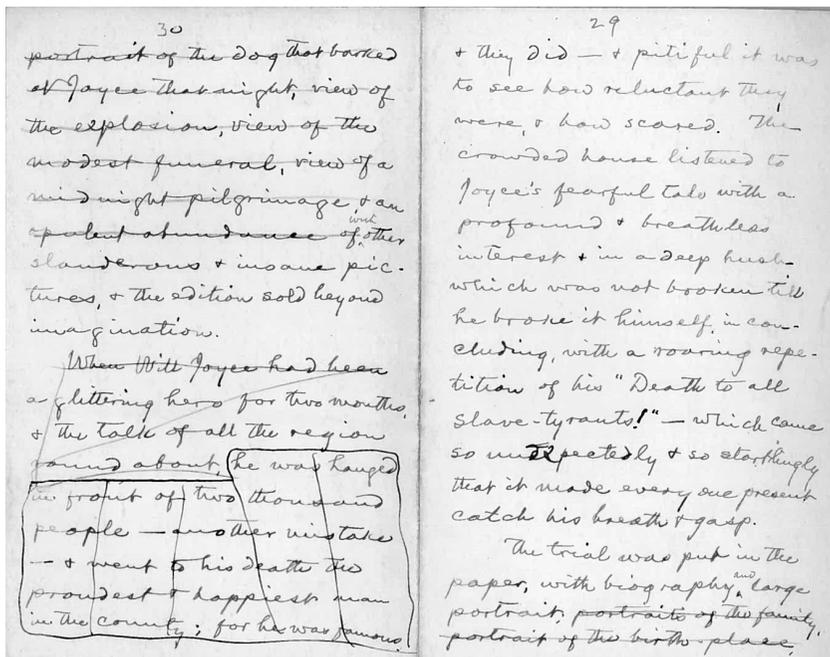


FIG. 6 Manuscript pages 29 and 30 (in reverse order), with Paine's pencil strikethroughs on the bottom of 29 (right) and most of 30 (left), and Twain's boxed cancellation in ink at the bottom of 30. Image courtesy of the Mark Twain Papers, Bancroft Library, UC Berkeley.

Within a month from his death the society which he had honored had twenty new members, some of them earnest, determined men. They did not court distinction in the same way, but they celebrated his martyrdom. The crime which had been obscure and despised had become lofty and glorified.

Such things were happening all over the country. Wild-brained martyrdom was succeeded by uprising and organization. Then, in natural order, followed riot, insurrection, and the wrack and restitutions of war. It was bound to come, and it would naturally come in that way. It has been the manner of reform since the beginning of the world.

Twain's last statement in the manuscript is ponderously blunt: "It was a mistake." The acceptance implied in Paine's addition, on the other hand, does not cohere with the rest of the story (Fig. 8).

"It was a mistake" bears little resemblance to the "natural order" and eventual restitution; the phrase instead repeats the previous instances of overwrought

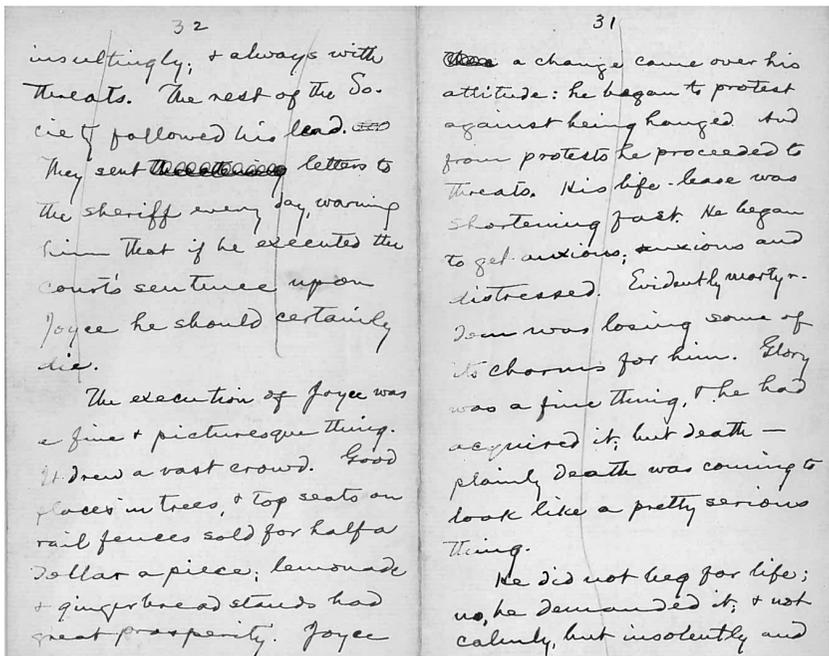


FIG. 7 Manuscript pages of pages 31 and 32 (in reverse order), featuring Paine's longest excision of the sketch (rendered in light pencil) and Twain's minor revisions in ink. Image courtesy of the Mark Twain Papers, Bancroft Library, UC Berkeley.

justice. “It” hangs near the top of the manuscript page, asking readers to ponder what the ambiguous “It” is—the hanging, radical politics, injustice, all of it? It also beggars belief that a storyteller as talented as Twain would refer to the “natural order” and end a piece with a sentence as dull as “It has been the manner of reform since the beginning of the world.” Paine’s conclusion makes the story an iteration of cyclical civil unrest that eventually settles and leads to reform, yet Twain, at this point in his life, was not at all sanguine about the “natural order” and particularly the ability of people to transcend their cruelty, conformity, and vanity.

Perhaps Paine’s most puzzling word in his invented conclusion is “reform,” for where else in that sketch—or in the commentary about French anarchists—is there any promise of reform? In “The United States of Lyncherdom”—an essay written in 1901 which he chose not to publish in his lifetime for fear of alienating his Southern readers—Twain attributes the problem of reform to a human tendency of “Moral Cowardice”: “man’s commonest weakness, his aversion to being unpleasantly conspicuous, pointed at, shunned, as being on the unpopular side.” He even connects this problem to abolitionism:

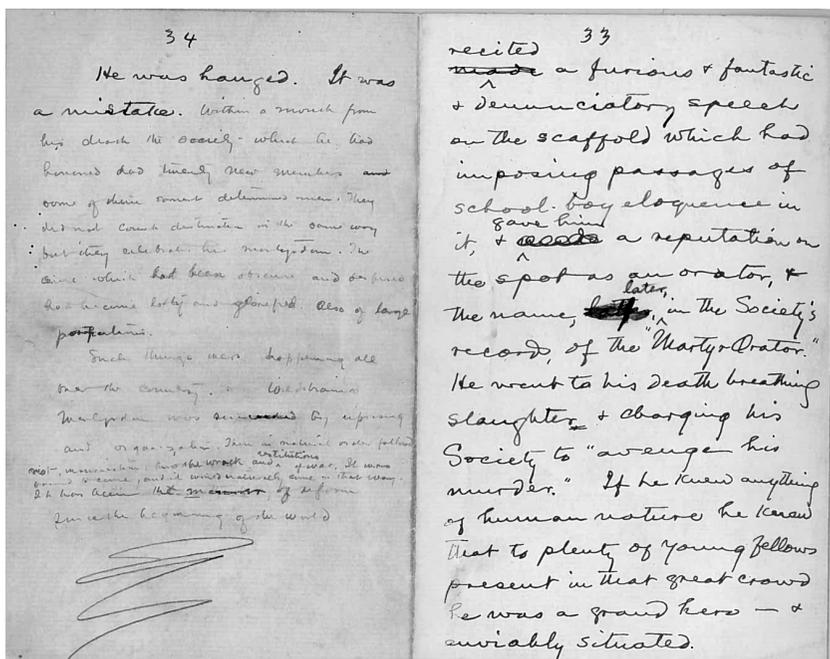


FIG. 8 The manuscript leaf with the final two pages of “A Scrap of Curious History,” with Paine’s added paragraphs in pencil on page 34. Image courtesy of the Mark Twain Papers, Bancroft Library, UC Berkeley.

It persistently and sardonically reminds us that from the beginning of the world no revolt against a public infamy or oppression has ever been begun but by the one daring man in the 10,000, the rest timidly waiting, and slowly and reluctantly joining, under the influence of that man and his fellows from the other ten thousands. The abolitionists remember. Privately the public feeling was with them early, but each man was afraid to speak out until he got some hint that his neighbor was privately as he privately felt himself.

“A Scrap of Curious History” lacks the moral clarity of “The United States of Lyncherdom,” a proper essay which decries the “barbaric” practice of lynching because it encourages malign imitators, “the world being so well supplied with excitable people who only need a little stirring up to make them lose what is left of their heads and do mad things which they would not have thought of ordinarily.”

It is not known whether Twain intended “It was a mistake” to be the final ending to the “Scrap.” It is possible that he never had a chance to add more to it later or to fully flesh out his complicated and conflicting ideas, or perhaps he

simply gave up on the sketch and placed it into one of several pigeonholes of unfinished work. Nevertheless, the ambiguous conclusion in the original manuscript aptly reflects an attempt to deal earnestly with the political anxieties of the 1890s, and to show how they resonated with the troubled memories and consequences of antebellum America.

Given the fact that abolitionism seems to have not factored into Clemens's boyhood experience in Hannibal, it is puzzling that he compared anarchists to imagined radical abolitionists in antebellum Missouri. In all of the three-volume *Autobiography of Mark Twain*, there is not one substantive reminiscence of abolitionist activities. The only passage which suggests the basis of ignorance about abolitionism—and his home region's suppression of it—occurs in one of his preliminary autobiographical sketches, in which he indicates that as a child he “was not aware that there was anything wrong about [slavery]. No one arraigned it in my hearing; the local papers said nothing against it; the local pulpit taught us that God approved it, that it was a holy thing, and that the doubter need only look in the Bible if he wished to settle his mind” (*Autobiography* 1: 212).²² Early in his biography of Twain, Paine writes that “any one in that day who advanced the idea of freeing the slaves was held in abhorrence. An abolitionist was something to despise, to stone out of the community. The children held the name in horror, as belonging to something less than human; something with claws, perhaps, and a tail” (1: 42). “A Scrap of Curious History” clearly reflects Paine's description, yet the events in the piece relating to Clemens's childhood in Missouri are fictional.

The original sketch in manuscript employs the language of drama—not unlike a “history” play by Shakespeare—to distance itself from historical fidelity and moral imperative, prefiguring W. H. Auden's saying that “You cannot tell people what to do, you can only tell them parables” (341). As Frank Sosey's “Palmyra and Its Historical Environment” details, the “Scrap” alludes to various unrelated events in the 1830s and early 1840s featuring minor abolitionist activities in several towns in and around Marion County—most of which were met by vicious mobs of pro-slavery Missourians. Twain's sketch does resemble the true story of a prominent militant abolitionist, George Thompson, who was born in New Jersey, and who, along with James Burr and Alanson Work, was caught attempting to ferry Missouri slaves across the Mississippi into Quincy, Illinois, in 1841. John Marshall Clemens was one of the jurors in the trial, which had attracted huge crowds and ample press coverage, so it is likely that his son's distant memory of that event inspired the sketch (Yannielli 985;

Fishkin, *Lighting Out for the Territory* 53–58).²³ However, Thompson and his conspirators, while convicted for the plot, were not executed, and their activities are not known to have inspired more abolitionist activity.

Perhaps his writing the “Scrap” was a misdirected fit of anger toward unstable politics while visiting the health spa, but he was also picking up themes he had explored in earlier humorous sketches. For example, in “Lionizing Murderers,” he frets about “the sentimental custom of visiting, petting, glorifying, and snuffling over murderers . . . from the day they enter the jail under sentence of death until they swing from the gallows,” turning a “bloody and hateful devil” into a “sainted martyr” (*Sketches New and Old* 184, 186). There is nothing to laugh about in the “Scrap,” as the narrator curiously ponders the appropriateness of the radical social change that created the martyr and instigated the mob behavior. Twain may have intended to strengthen his point by comparing two disparate political situations that share a common theme of insidious vanity and hasty legal reactions. Revolutionary actions lead to a double bind of admiration and imitation by a powerful minority, and fear by the masses and ill-judged legal enforcement by the authorities. Even though Twain’s narrator seems to oppose all forms of revolution, the sketch also satirizes the spectacle of public executions, the unethical and opportunistic journalists, the hypocrisy of the religious and business leaders, and the conformity and cowardice of the townspeople. The sketch attempts to show the lack of thought and sympathy on both sides of the issue, for radical abolitionists were known to employ divisive tactics that won them no support from those ambivalent slaveholders who could have been persuaded to change.

Still, the sketch does not address the unsettling point that the underlying moral argument for abolitionism does not apply to the radical, nihilistic position of anarchism. Perhaps this lack of clarity—and potential for moral equivocation—led to his decision not to see it through to publication in his lifetime. As it was originally drafted the sketch exposes the problem of the notion of civilized behavior: the line of demarcation between disorder-anarchy and law-order—and uncivilized and civilized behavior—is thin, and this poses a risk to democracy. As he later wrote in a notebook entry, near the end of his life, “We have thrown away the most valuable asset we had:—the individual’s right to oppose both flag & mob country when he (just he, by himself), believed them to be in the wrong” (undated entry, Notebook 48). That substitution of “country” for “mob” is telling. In this notebook entry and in the “Scrap” he is echoing Thomas Carlyle and Edmund Burke’s criticism of mobs in the French Revolution, in addition to Carlyle’s call for individual heroism to change history.

Twain was an avid reader of Carlyle, as Walter Blair had established, and he was also familiar with Burke's work (Fulton 82–88; Lemaster and Wilson 105–6). Haunting Twain's view of anarchy in Europe in the sketch is his awareness that the United States faced its own injustice and domestic terrorism in the 1890s in the form of Jim Crow, which he did later address in "The United States of Lyncherdom."

Yet Twain's revisions in the manuscript—especially with his decision to add more detail to Joyce's trial and execution—point to a creative process imbued with skepticism of any received opinion, but one which also realizes the limits of that skepticism. The sketch ends in a state of aporia as to which solution might be workable in such a broken society. Like Nietzsche, Twain could not offer a coherent politics or account of society, despite his extraordinary psychological and moral insights.²⁴ Nevertheless, Twain does raise a troubling question: is vanity a requirement for political activism?

While composing "A Scrap of Curious History," in the summer of 1894, Mark Twain was in the midst of taking more risks: his focused, sharp defense of Harriet Shelley, which attacks Percy Shelley's biographer Edward Dowden's misogyny, had just appeared in the *North American Review*, and he was working on his most ambitious project to date, *Personal Recollections of Joan of Arc* (which also clearly involves martyrdom and political rebellion). He had recently struggled with the comic and tragic elements of *Pudd'nhead Wilson* (1894), another piece of fiction set in antebellum Missouri which raises some of the most difficult questions about race, identity, and the evils of slavery in his oeuvre. Following a theme he had explored in *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, "A Scrap of Curious History" features an eccentric outsider who arrives in small-town Missouri with "Eastern" ideas and quickly becomes a pariah. Robert Hardy's vocal identification with abolitionism in the "Scrap" far exceeds David Wilson's faux pas that leads to his "Pudd'nhead" sobriquet. Hardy and the band of abolitionists that follow him engage in inexcusable violence. David Wilson's reputation is eventually redeemed; on the other hand, the "Scrap" features no real heroes, which Twain highlights with the sarcastic statement that Joyce was a "grand hero." The conclusion to the "Scrap"—with its lack of consolation regarding social progress—is as bleak and unforgiving as the end of *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, when the antagonist Tom Driscoll, designated a slave at birth but raised as a slave-owning free man, is sold down the river. In this sense Paine's conclusion to the "Scrap" resembles the "ironic suggestion" of the town's denials that "fall on deaf ears" in the final sentences of *Pudd'nhead Wilson* (Robinson 30). However, the conclusion to *Pudd'nhead* also rests on the cruel logic of slavery,

which denies agency even to the murderer: “it was not he [Tom Driscoll] that had really committed the murder [of Judge Driscoll], the guilt lay with the erroneous inventory. Everybody saw that there was reason in this. Everybody granted that if ‘Tom’ were white and free it would be unquestionably right to punish him” (303). Whereas “reason” in *Pudd’nhead* concerns capital, the “Scrap” pairs reason with terrorism, after Joyce bombs the clergyman’s house: “The town was paralyzed again. And with reason. To struggle against a visible enemy is a thing worth while, and there are plenty of men who stand always ready to undertake it; but to struggle against an invisible one—an invisible one who sneaks in and does his awful work in the dark and leaves no trace—that is another matter. That is a thing to make the bravest tremble and hold back.” Invisible enemies are always potentially lurking, making people “paralyzed”—that is, conservative. The status quo often succeeds because it is too frightening to imagine the consequences and uncertainties of the alternatives. The only seeming catharsis comes from executions that provide an opportunity for escapism and greed, but those are short-lived victories. The conclusion in the manuscript of the “Scrap” is not gaudy and thrilling—and, as it were, conclusive—in a way that can detract from the tragedy. Confronting the tragedy with a sigh, the narrator shows that logic fails him, and them.²⁵

Shelley Fisher Fishkin has remarked that Twain’s hometown of Hannibal “is a palimpsest that yields diverse and often contradictory meanings. It is also a microcosm of America itself—its promise and its potential, its guilt and its shame,” representing the “innocence and irony of American history” (*Lighting Out for the Territory* 14–15). While Marion City is not Twain’s hometown, it is still a neighbor of it that shows the “promise” and “guilt,” and the “innocence and irony,” in great and unresolved tension. This doubleness complicates Budd’s interpretation—which uses Paine’s interpolated conclusion as evidence—that Twain was merely calling for a measured response to radical politics (161).

The “Scrap” suggests that inflicting capital punishment on revolutionary figures is a mistake. Curiously, though, revolution might itself be a mistake, as its fanaticism instigates a pattern of avenging martyrs and violent backlashes by vainglorious activists. Both positions seem less controversial with regards to anarchists, but Twain leaves an unsettling ambiguity about abolitionism, a morally right cause that he probably supported, even if retrospectively. It recalls that persistent question of how much violence can be accepted to aid the right cause, a question which Henry David Thoreau answered forcefully in his defense of John Brown, that although “you may not approve of his [violent] method or his principles, recognize his magnanimity.” For Thoreau, what

matters is that he “did not recognize unjust human laws, but resisted them as he was bid. For once we are lifted out of the trivialness and dust of politics into the region of truth and manhood” (123, 125). Twain’s narrator instead echoes a mainstream distaste in the nineteenth century toward the radicalism of the likes of Brown and Thoreau. Like Herman Melville, Twain did not devote any energy to abolishing slavery, even though he probably would have agreed with the spirit of Melville’s statement decrying the “atheistical inequity” of slavery in his “Supplement” to his Civil War poetry collection *Battle-Pieces and Aspects of the War* (1866). Twain’s railing against revolutionary “vanity” also anticipates what Joseph Conrad’s condescending diplomat Mr. Vladimir suggests in *The Secret Agent*, that the masses can be “blinded by an idiotic vanity” and that anarchists will attract “fools” who attribute to it “the character of a religious manifestation” (26, 28). Even Conrad’s narrator, who is likewise recalling European anarchist activities of the 1890s, parallels the language of Twain’s sketch when he says a “portion of social rebels is accounted for by vanity, the mother of all noble and vile illusions” (48).

The vanity of radical abolitionists, the conformity of pro-slavery Missourians, the moral bankruptcy of religious leaders, and the eruptions of violence—all these elements in the “Scrap” reflect Twain’s philosophical view of human character: “Intolerance is everything for one’s self, and nothing for the other person. The main-spring of man’s nature is just that—selfishness” (*What Is Man?* 64). Innate selfishness also inhibits the ability to reason about moral challenges, including “the slavery question,” because people crave instead one-sided arguments and dubious evidence to support their position: “he thinks, muses, . . . rehearses its statistics & its parts & applies to them what other people on his side of the question have said about them, but he does not compare the parts himself, & is not capable of doing it” (undated entry [late 1896 or early 1897], Notebook 39).

The evidence in Mark Twain’s “A Scrap of Curious History” manuscript proves the value of returning to archival materials and publishing processes of Twain’s late work, as Terry Oggel did with the manuscript of “The United States of Lyncherdom.” In the case of “A Scrap of Curious History,” Paine’s and Harper’s interventions make a complicated, ambiguous, and unfinished story appear more straightforward and complete than is actually the case. While the bowdlerized publication of “A Scrap of Curious History” is a kind of cultural artifact, it is also important to understand the revisions and publishing process behind this fascinating and underappreciated sketch. Moreover, doing so provides further evidence that Paine shaped Twain’s posthumous legacy by

modifying and publishing his unfinished papers. The fact that Twain could not finish his only piece of writing about abolitionism speaks volumes about the ongoing problems of racial inequality, class struggle, and political progress after the Civil War. The sketch also shows that scholars could attend to further abolitionist resonances in Twain's work, and provide commentary on his views of social change that shows an awareness of the vast surviving body of archival material which still requires further exploration.

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Notes

The manuscript for "A Scrap of Curious History" discussed in this essay is housed in the Mark Twain Papers, University of California, Berkeley (referred to throughout as CU-MARK). It consists of seventeen leaves treated as folders, pages numbered [1]–34, written in purple and brown ink on laid paper. Manuscript quotations and images are reproduced by permission of the Mark Twain Foundation, 2001.

1. Another pertinent fact: he served a brief stint as a Confederate militiaman in 1861, as he recalled in his burlesque "Private History of a Campaign that Failed" (1885), but the sketch implies his heart was never in the Rebel cause.

2. "SLC to Jane Lampton Clemens, 24 Aug 1853, New York, N.Y. (UCCL 02711)," retrieved 6 Mar. 2020 from <https://www.marktwainproject.org/xtf/view?docId=letters/UCCL02711.xml;query=;searchAll=;sectionType1=;sectionType2=;sectionType3=;sectionType4=;sectionType5=;style=letter;brand=mtp#1>. I also cite the individual online text entries because they are more up to date than their print versions.

3. "Letter from Mark Twain," letter dated July, San Francisco *Alta California*, 25 July 1869, p. 1.

4. "SLC to OLC and Charles J. Langdon, 10 March 1869," retrieved 13 Feb. 2019 from <https://www.marktwainproject.org/xtf/view?docId=letters/UCCL00274.xml;query=;searchAll=;sectionType1=;sectionType2=;sectionType3=;sectionType4=;sectionType5=;style=letter;brand=mtp#1>.

5. Clemens was quoted in Jervis Langdon's obituary that he "was an Abolitionist from the cradle, and worked openly and valiantly in that cause all through the days when to do

such a thing was to ensure to a man disgrace" (qtd. in Lee 101). See also L2 (244 note 3), Trombley (73), and Fishkin (*A Historical Guide to Mark Twain* 133–34).

6. Clemens was also an admirer of Henry Ward Beecher, the most prominent abolitionist in the family. See, for example, his January 8, 1868, letter to Jane Lampton Clemens and Pamela A. Moffett in which he recalls attending an entertaining dinner party at Beecher's (UCCL 00175), retrieved 13 Feb. 2019 from <http://www.marktwainproject.org/xtf/view?docId=letters/UCCL00175.xml;style=letter;brand=mtp>.

7. The MTP edition also notes that Twain parodies "Am I Not a Man and a Brother?" in Chapter 4 of *Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, when Tom, having gotten out of a bath, says he is "a man and a brother, without distinction of color" (28).

8. For example, Minnie Brashear's *Art, Humor, and Humanity of Mark Twain* (246–53) reprints the expurgated text of "A Scrap of Curious History," as does Charles Neider's *Complete Essays* (which is odd, because the sketch is not really an essay). Ronald Jenn and Paula Harrington's *Mark Twain in France* also refers to the *Harper's* version, calling it both an "essay" and "fictional," and concluding that the "object lesson" of the piece "rings false today because of its distressingly anti-abolitionist views" (164–67).

9. I have not found any references to the composition or status of "A Scrap of Curious History" in Mark Twain's letters or journals. Many thanks go to Dr. Amanda Gagel, formerly an associate editor at the Mark Twain Project, who confirmed through handwriting analysis of other Paine manuscripts in the collection that Paine made the substantive additions to the manuscript that are alluded to in this essay.

10. Part of this passage is also quoted in Caroline Harnsberger, *Everyone's Mark Twain* (33–34). The second half of the quote refers not to Carnot's assassin, but to another anarchist who on June 16, 1894, attempted to assassinate the Italian statesman Francesco Crispi on the streets of Rome.

11. A good example of Paine's posthumous editing of Mark Twain can be found in the *Autobiography of Mark Twain*. See the introduction to the 2010 UC Press edition, where the editors make clear that Paine "felt obliged to suppress or even alter certain passages without notice to the reader," and he only ended up publishing about a third of the total cache of autobiographical materials (*Autobiography* 1: 3). The most pertinent example for literature is *The Mysterious Stranger*, which Paine and Duneka edited for publication in 1916: they selected an earlier version from the three surviving manuscripts and proceeded to make significant modifications, effectively publishing a story that had never existed before. For more on this, see the introduction to Gibson's *Mysterious Stranger Manuscripts*. I have also found evidence of Paine's modifications to other posthumously published stories such as "My Platonic Sweetheart" (also at CU-MARK). See also Terry Oggel's reconsideration of the "United States of Lyncherdom" in "Speaking Out about Race."

12. From here I will be quoting as exactly as possible from the surviving manuscript, not the published version, since the latter has non-authorial changes. Most of Paine's changes are explained in the footnotes to show how the manuscript compares to what readers encountered in the published text. Myriad punctuation and capitalization variants also appear in *Harper's*. Twain's deletions and additions are recorded in-text: deletions are recorded as strikethroughs and words or phrases that were added are surrounded by carets (^).

13. Twain originally ended the sentence after "months," but then added the dash and the clause following it. Paine's erased pencil strikethrough shows that he initially wanted to delete the additional clause about Missouri changing policy before deciding against it.

14. The misprint of "Ravochal" in *Harper's* introduced an error in Twain's otherwise correct spelling of the prominent French anarchist (also known as Francois Claudius Koenigstein).

15. All three were anarchists associated with acts of vengeance following the execution of Ravachol in 1892: Émile Henry, who bombed the Café Terminus at the Gare Saint-Lazare in Paris in 1894; Auguste Vaillant, who threw an ineffective bomb into the Chambre des députés in Paris in 1893; and Sante Geronimo Caserio, who assassinated President Carnot in Lyon in 1894.

16. Paine canceled “are likely” and added “may,” in the manuscript, thus changing Mark Twain’s phrase to “may be humbugs” in *Harper’s*.

17. This final sentence did not appear in *Harper’s* (Paine did not strike it out with his pencil).

18. Twain indicated “OVER” here and added the sentence on the back of the leaf.

19. Paine substituted “legacy” for “corpse’s work,” an interesting choice.

20. All of the minute details from “how he turned . . . house,” were omitted in *Harper’s* and rendered simply as “minutest particulars; how he deposited . . .” Paine did not strike out the passage in the MS, so it is unclear if it was he or *Harper’s* editors who omitted the passage.

21. Paine deleted most of this passage (from “portraits of the family . . . abundance of”) in the manuscript, so it did not appear in *Harper’s*.

22. In an autobiographical dictation of October 11, 1906, Clemens also comments in passing on Redpath’s abolitionist activities in Kansas, but he was speaking about Redpath’s character rather than abolitionism as a movement (*Autobiography* 2: 255–56). Also relevant is Douglas Anderson’s discussion of “ambivalent images” in Twain’s recollections of slaves on his uncle John Quarles’s farm in *The Introspective Art of Mark Twain* (33–37).

23. Also, through a study of surviving court records, Oleta Prinsloo has demonstrated that local slaveholders created “fictions” that the slaves had betrayed Thompson, Burr, and Work in order to justify to themselves that slavery was a benevolent institution. In fact, slaveholders had coerced the runaway slaves into cooperating in the arrest of the abolitionists.

24. I owe this point to Bernard Williams’s comments on Nietzsche’s failure to integrate his insights from Greek philology to effect a better conception of modern society (10).

25. Bernard Williams makes another helpful point, this time regarding the “indeterminacy of fiction,” that is relevant to Twain’s framing of tragedy: “By compelling our attention and directing our fears to what it presents as actual, tragedy may leave us with no thought, and no need of thought, about anything else. The general condition with fiction is that, beyond a certain point, there are no interesting or realistic questions about alternatives to the action” (146).

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