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# Massacre and the Masses: Mark Twain, the Press, and the Reinvention of the Self

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*This article examines Mark Twain's newspaper hoax "A Bloody Massacre Near Carson" (1863) and its resulting controversy alongside Twain's comments on the press. By examining Twain's early journalism, I hope to demonstrate how his comments on the press, when viewed together, questioned the journalist's ability to report objective truths.*

In her article, "Brand Management: Samuel Clemens, Trademarks, and the Mark Twain Enterprise," Judith Yaross Lee highlights Mark Twain's use of various schemes to market his persona early in his career, coinciding with a particular historical moment. She notes "The post-Civil War period gave individualism a new push in the mythology of the self-made man, which mass media and celebrity furthered in the self-perpetuating cycle that made Mark Twain a topic of publications" (29). As the "self-made man," Twain's publications indeed promoted his creation. After creating the Mark Twain pseudonym in February 1863, Twain published the controversial hoax "A Bloody Massacre Near Carson" in October of the same year. In this article, I examine "A Bloody Massacre" and its resulting controversy alongside Twain's comments on the press in his lecture "License of the Press." In examining the formation of Twain's persona and his rise to notoriety during his years as a journalist, I will demonstrate how Twain's comments on the press, when viewed together, set a precedent for a proto-postmodern journalist figure.

As a journalist using the techniques of fiction, Twain could reinvent himself through his relationship with the press. Further, crucial to Twain's commentary is a repeated preoccupation with the press' mishandling of the "truth." Twain expressed concerns about the press in a newspaper and during a lecture, thereby using forms bearing expectations of accuracy and reliability to build his own mythology and to question representations of fact trusted by the public. Of particular interest to Twain were the journalists comprising the press, to which Twain once belonged. In the hoax and speech, both from different parts of Twain's career, the journalist figure proves vital for Twain's repeated self-invention and reinvention. Twain's works refute the view of journalists as holders of truth, depicting them as fiction writers like himself.

Regarding the earliest phases of Twain's career, Harold Bloom argues, "This vital period of his life is potentially and frequently overshadowed by his later, international career. This 'prehistory,' which precedes his novels, romances, and travel books, his hobnobbing with millionaires and celebrities, and his acclaimed after-dinner speeches nevertheless saw the proper development of the 'Mark Twain' persona" (7). Bloom's statement is correct in acknowledging the lack of scholarship about Twain's earliest writing. The early years of Twain's career from 1862 to 1875 are key in establishing the Twain figure, but remain largely overlooked by scholars. James E. Caron discusses the origin of Twain's career

extensively in *Mark Twain, Unsanctified Newspaper Reporter* (2008). Since Caron's thorough study, scholarship remains limited on the importance of Twain's early career. This importance cannot be overstated; the "pre-history" of Twain's persona included his interaction with the many media Twain inhabited early in his career, which allowed for him to publicize his engagement with the newspaper business. Twain's earliest journalistic writing, when viewed alongside the period that saw Twain's emergence as an international celebrity, demonstrates that the Twain character was a malleable persona. The transformation of his persona can be analysed in three stages: his early newspaper hoaxes, his lectures, and his first book-length publications that received international acclaim. At each stage, Twain offered a new version of the character he created, each of which presented commercial benefits. Additionally, and perhaps more importantly, Twain's writing as an unconventional reporter and its resulting controversies differ drastically from the image of a beloved American icon that Twain would hold by the time of his death in 1910.

### **The Newspaper Hoaxer**

To begin discussing Twain's performance as a journalistic figure, one should look to the creation of his pseudonym. Twain's use of a pseudonym while writing for a newspaper is one of the most distinguishing characteristics of Twain's persona. The circumstances in which Twain's pseudonym was created are important to remember. While writing for a newspaper, Samuel Clemens began forming the Twain persona. This juxtaposition between an invented persona and a factual medium presents an important tension. Rather than merely functioning as a pen name, "Mark Twain" was drawing attention to the ambiguities existing in works deemed factual. Twain demonstrated how the newspaper business, though thriving on a reputation for reliability and accuracy, was a constructed form, holding the possibility of flawed representations of the "truth." Asserting his subjectivity in the form of an invented character therefore revealed the unquestioned objectivity of the newspaper as a necessary illusion to maintain its power.

Drawing attention to his identity as a writer crafting a narrative, much like the other journalists writing for the newspaper, was one tactic Twain used to problematize notions of a newspaper as an authority. Another tactic was inserting fictional elements into newspaper "reports." In undermining the newspaper's power, a chief source of genre-blending that Twain used early in his career was the newspaper hoax, a form "thoroughly concealing its fictional nature behind the guise of realistic presentation" (Wonham 33). By utilizing invention instead of factual reporting, hoaxes lampooned the conventions of newspaper writing. Further, they indicted the readers' tendency to read the news items carelessly. Twain's use of the newspaper hoax capitalized on a form that had already caused controversy in newspaper writing. A part of the move towards attention-seeking headlines during the commercialization of the newspaper business in the nineteenth century included the popularizing of newspaper hoaxes. Thirty years before Twain's own notorious hoax, the *New York Sun* increased its circulation numbers significantly by publishing "The Great Moon Hoax," a series of articles detailing discoveries of life on the Moon that included winged creatures. *The Sun's* circulation numbers, which

rose to a “two and a half fold increase within a few days” (Vida 435), gained enough influence to inspire clergymen to plan missionary work on the Moon.

Unlike the wildly inventive nature of “The Great Moon Hoax,” Twain’s hoaxes mirrored trends that newspaper readers recognized, including sensationalized news items, which flagged the constructed nature of news reports. Five months before the appearance of “Mark Twain,” Samuel Clemens published his first hoax, “The Petrified Man,” in the *Virginia City Territorial Enterprise* on October 4, 1862. In his first hoax, Twain started a trend in his career of questioning the integrity of newspaper writing. Mocking the popularity of newspaper stories about petrified objects, the hoax described the pose of a fictional mummified figure. The petrified mummy proved a useful vehicle for Twain’s critique of the petrified objects’ popularity in newspaper reports. The physical details of the figure read as if they belonged to a plausible newspaper report, with the figure’s description characterized by an objective tone from an omniscient narrator. The reporter describes the mummy in the following measured statements: “the attitude was pensive, the right thumb resting against the side of the nose; the left thumb partially supported the chin, the fore-finger pressing the inner corner of the left eye and drawing it partly open; the right eye was closed, and the fingers of the right hand spread apart” (Twain 159<sup>1</sup>). Readers visualizing the description, as James E. Caron notes, find a winking man, thumbing his nose at the spectator (54).

The mummy’s pose serves as a greater symbol when considering the commercialization of the news industry, as Bruce Michelson notes. He asserted, “Twain’s dreamed-up stone corpse also winked at the riskiness of believing, and disseminating, news dispatches of any sort clattering in from nowhere, with no bylines affixed, on a national tangle of wires that only compounded the alienation from a verifiable source” (54). With the definition of “news” in question, evolving with the introduction of the telegraph, Twain’s tactics interrogate the trust granted to an industry in flux. As a “verifiable source,” Twain undermined the value in attributing a news story to a journalist, considering the journalist honoured a set of conventions that could be manipulated. Whether maintaining the newspaper’s reputation, or feigning journalistic integrity, conventions of news reports served a purpose that could stray from representing “the truth,” as Twain demonstrated.

Before he began the controversy surrounding “A Bloody Massacre,” Twain had begun establishing his place in the public consciousness as a writer manipulating journalistic convention. In the same year that Clemens adopted the pseudonym “Mark Twain,” he began gaining notoriety for the character he created. The *Virginia City Bulletin* published an unsigned note in August of 1863 that declared, “At the solicitation of at least 1500 of our subscribers, we will refrain from again entering into a controversy with that beef-eating, blear-eyed, hollow-headed, slab-sided ignoramus—that pilfering reporter, Mark Twain” (qtd. in Bloom 10). Significant from this note is the use of “reporter” to describe Mark Twain, which alludes to his place in the newspaper as a way of identifying his character. By highlighting the fact that journalists constructed newspaper articles, Twain’s use of his invented persona allowed him to critique the newspaper business, but it also brought attention to the techniques his persona used for critique. One such technique was the repeated defence of his individuality in the face of newspapers’ collective interests. Twain’s comments on newspapers’ flawed model of “objective

reporting” then highlighted the “noble” nature of Twain’s aim to right their wrongs. The tension between Twain’s persona-building and a newspapers’ efforts to maintain its reputation is clearly visible in the “Bloody Massacre” newspaper hoax and its resulting controversy.

Appearing as a news item in an October 1863 issue of the *Daily Territorial Enterprise*, “A Bloody Massacre near Carson” informed readers of the murder of a woman and children by her husband. The hoax gives a thorough account of the murders, including such descriptions as, “The scalpless corpse of Mrs. Hopkins lay across the threshold, with her head split open and her right hand almost severed from the wrist.” Other gruesome images include that of the eldest daughter “frightfully mutilated, and the knife with which her wounds had been inflicted still sticking in her side” (325-26). Such images, sensationalizing the murders, appealed to newspaper readers’ curiosity and enhanced the drama of the narrative Twain offered. The scene of the murdered Hopkins family ended with a description of the event leading Philip Hopkins to murder his family, revealing that the murder featured into a larger drama. Towards the end of the hoax, Hopkins is named as a victim of the San Francisco newspapers’ involvement in hiding cooked dividends. The final lines of the hoax state the San Francisco papers’ error explicitly: “The newspapers of San Francisco permitted this water company to go on borrowing money and cooking dividends” (326). The accusatory nature of the claim is strengthened by Twain’s use of “permitted,” which suggests the newspapers remained culpable in their inaction.

Twain tested readers’ credulity by printing his critique in the *Enterprise*, another newspaper, which the beginning of the hoax further questions. “A Bloody Massacre near Carson” presents itself as a report, relaying a story given by a trusted and recognizable source. Twain opens the hoax with a convincing frame: “From Abram Curry, who arrived here yesterday afternoon from Carson, we have learned the following particulars concerning a bloody massacre” (324). Twain’s text is made more trustworthy with the mention of Curry; Jeffrey Bilbro submits, “By using Curry’s name, who was the founder of Carson City and a prominent citizen, Twain gives his story legitimacy” (208). Further, Twain safeguards his role in relaying the information, as Bilbro suggests in his claim that Twain “is simply repeating what he heard from a reliable source” (208). Passing the responsibility for the report’s details to another source, Twain convincingly modelled his report after other reports belonging in a newspaper. He deceived readers into believing he had gathered information as a responsible reporter would, all while leaving himself outside of the narrative. The concluding statement of Twain’s hoax again removes the responsibility of the report from Twain personally. He writes, “We hope the fearful massacre detailed above may prove the saddest result of their silence” (325-26). The plural pronoun works to convince readers that the impersonal voice of the newspaper details the event, as it would in other news stories printed alongside Twain’s. As a result, the fictional nature of the story is overlooked in favour of trusting the “objective” style of the newspaper.

The “massacre detailed above,” if read carefully by the community, would have been revealed to be an impossible event. Richard Lillard notes: “Readers forgot that Empire City and Dutch Nick’s were the same place, that there were no trees for miles around, that there was no old log house, that Hopkins, a bachelor, was proprietor of the Magnolia Saloon in Carson City, and that no man with his throat cut from ear to ear could ride four miles” (199). Overlooking each of these facts, readers

responding to the hoax also overlooked Twain's commentary on the newspaper's failings. Once the falsehood of the report was revealed, the controversy pinned Twain as an irresponsible reporter, which he capitalized on to portray himself as a writer with the public's interests in mind. What arose afterwards was an opportunity for Twain to defend his reputation, particularly given the hostility that he faced from other newspaper commentators.

As Henry Wonham states, "Clemens succeeded all too well at simulating an authoritative tone" (64) in the hoax, and his article began a series of responses and chastisements from other newspapers. Questioning Twain's moral character, the controversy and the responses it produced fixated on Twain's failed "joke." Rather than directing their criticism towards the San Francisco papers' deceit, readers focused on negatively characterizing Twain. For instance, the *Evening Bulletin* mocked Twain by stating, "The man who could pen such a story, with all its horrors depicted in such infernal detail . . . can have but a very indefinite idea of the elements of a joke" (qtd. in Bloom 11). The *Bulletin's* criticism joined other articles condemning Twain for violating the trust granted a newspaper by its readers. The *Gold Hill News* likewise decried Twain's fictionalizing, informing its readers, "The horrible story of a murder . . . turns out to be a mere 'witticism' of Mark Twain. In short a lie – utterly baseless, and without a shadow of foundation" (qtd. in Bloom 11). Despite the elements of Twain's story signalling its impossibility, the *Gold Hill News* and *Evening Bulletin* rejected its place in a newspaper, upholding a newspaper's reputation as a vehicle for facts and transparency. Any attempts on Twain's part to use unconventional means for reform backfired, leading Twain to continue his indictment of the very trust he was accused of violating. In the process, Twain portrayed himself as the one wrongly accused of deceiving the public.

In a mock apology titled "I Take it all Back" and published the next day, Twain claimed, "it was necessary to publish the story in order to get the fact into the San Francisco papers that the Spring Valley Water company was 'cooking' dividends." (320-21). The use of the strong declarative phrase "it was necessary" bears an authoritative tone that models the newspaper's tone. Twain continues using an assertive tone, contrasting with the sensational details of his massacre, to explicitly condemn the newspaper. He asserted, "The only way you can get a fact into a San Francisco journal is to smuggle it in through some great tragedy" (321). By explaining his article, Twain continued to highlight the newspaper's silence and its susceptibility to an attention-grabbing article filling and exploiting the absence of information. He defends himself by showing that his hoax is of lesser significance than corporate deception. Jeffrey Bilbro demonstrates how Twain's article proves an elaborate indictment of such crimes committed by the Press; he summarizes, "For Twain, the real horror was not the gory massacre but the cavalier way in which the newspapers cooperated with greedy speculators" (208). Bilbro's article joins the limited scholarship on "A Bloody Massacre," which has focused on characterizing the newspaper hoax as a form and documenting the resulting backlash from other publications. However, scholars have overlooked the hoax's importance as a precursor for Twain's later critique of the Press, which reached wider audiences than newspaper editors and readers in the West.

## The Lecturer

Twain's work to cultivate a recognizable persona in his newspaper work was furthered by his experiences on the lecture circuit, which presented him with an opportunity to address fame and celebrity. The lecture circuit was a natural medium for Twain to occupy, given the manner in which lectures served as a "witness of personality" (Moran 17). By appearing on the lecture circuit and in the popular press, Twain built a career that profited on a likable image. In his study of celebrity authors, Joe Moran references the work of Aaron Fogel and his comparison between the nineteenth-century lecture circuit and the contemporary talk show. He writes, "in both forms the purpose is 'not narration ... instruction, drama, or debate, but the suggestion and witness of personality'" (17). Moran then submits, "The most successful speakers were those like Twain who, rather than simply reading from the lectern on worthy topics, produced a winning 'performance.'" In between Twain's hoax and his 1869 publication of *The Innocents Abroad*, a book that furthered his international fame, Twain gave his first of many lectures in San Francisco in 1866. Twain's role as a lecturer provided another opportunity for him to perform a self that capitalized on his experiences writing for a newspaper. The lecture resulted from *The Sacramento Union* sending Twain to Hawaii on assignment and admittedly representing an impulse for exoticism and essentialism in the nineteenth century, it allowed him to again mention habits of lying in the news-writing profession. He said of the native Hawaiians, "It is said by some, and believed, that Kanakas won't lie, but I know they *will* lie — lie like auctioneers — lie like lawyers — lie like patent-medicine advertisements — they will *almost* lie like *newspaper* men" (7, emphasis in original). In the litany of liars Twain states, newspaper men are placed at the pinnacle. Yet, Twain appears in the context of a *former* newspaperman as he gives the lecture. His appearance speaking as a lecturer rather than addressing readers in print thus distances himself from the newspaper writers he accuses. A minor comment in a lengthy speech whose focus was not the Press, it would find greater elaboration as Twain's fame on the lecture circuit grew. More importantly, the lecture set a precedent for Twain's later appearances as a moralist, which reprised the sentiment that Twain expressed during the "Bloody Massacre" controversy concerning a dishonest Press.

Twain's most direct indictment of the Press's failings came in his 1873 speech "License of the Press" before the Monday Evening Club at Hartford, Connecticut. Twain's lecture criticized the public's inability to read newspapers with discernment, notably inferring the charges against him for misusing the power held by journalists in newspapers. Again, as in the "Bloody Massacre" controversy, Twain warned that the newspaper's reports were capable of deceiving its readers. Twain asserted, "It has become a sarcastic proverb that a thing must be true if you saw it in a newspaper. That is the opinion intelligent people have of that lying vehicle in a nutshell" (47-48). Twain indicts the "lying vehicle" rather than the individual journalists, shirking the responsibility of the individual writer like himself. He further elaborated, "But the trouble is that the stupid people -- who constitute the grand overwhelming majority of this and all other nations-- do believe and are moulded and convinced by what they get out of a newspaper, and this is where the harm lies" (48). Perhaps drawing on the backlash caused by "A Bloody Massacre," Twain implicated newspaper readers, criticizing their trust in "what they get out of a newspaper." Further, Twain also detailed his view of how journalists joined "the stupid people," providing readers with untrustworthy material that consisted of opinions rather than fact.

Identifying them as “a horde of ignorant, self-complacent simpletons who failed at ditching and shoemaking and fetched up in journalism on their way to the poorhouse” (49), Twain generalized about the profession that first established his place in the public consciousness. He substantiated his criticism of journalists with numerous examples, including those that further promoted and defended his reputation. For instance, Twain claimed, “In a town in Michigan I declined to dine with an editor who was drunk, and he said, in his paper, that my lecture was profane, indecent, and calculated to encourage intemperance. And yet that man never heard it. It might have reformed him if he had” (51). Again, Twain positions journalists as subject to other interests than an unattainable aim of pure objectivity. His comment bears particular irony given the argument that Twain’s pseudonym resulted from his well-known habit of ordering two drinks in bars in Nevada (Eichin 116). Twain’s past reputation in the West, which more closely identified with the drunken editor, gave way to his conspicuous moralizing in front of an audience far removed from that of the miners seeking gold in the West.

Even if humorously adopting the morally superior stance in his anecdote, the rest of Twain’s lecture contains moments of explicit moralizing. He addressed morality and the newspaper in his assertion, “It seems to me that just in the ratio that our newspapers increase, our morals decay. The more newspapers the worse morals” (47). His statement distances his position as a lecturer from that of a journalist accused of contributing to the decaying of morals in his newspaper writing. The distance from newspaper hoaxer Samuel Clemens is then directly addressed in his statement: “I know from personal experience the proneness of journalists to lie. I once started a peculiar and picturesque fashion of lying myself on the Pacific coast, and it is not dead there to this day . . . And habit is everything — to this day I am liable to lie if I don't watch all the time” (49-50). By referencing his past, Twain highlights the discrepancies between the content of his lecture and his writing causing scandal in the West. Introducing himself into the lecture and providing biographical details of his former experiences, offering a confession of sorts, Twain further “hid the origin of his penname, one that evolved in the barrooms of early Virginia City, to present a ‘respectable’ persona to . . . other influential Easterners” (Eichin 113). Twain rewrites himself as the reformed sinner, the renegade individual who stands outside the established institution to condemn its practices. By presenting himself in such a way, the “unsanctified newspaper reporter” is given a new face.

The lecture allowed Twain to perform a version of himself that featured autobiographical elements crafted deliberately to support his argument. Performing the role of a subjective journalist figure, Twain questioned the authority of the newspaper and the journalist, examined the tension between newspaper as an institution and journalist as an individual, and explicated his motives as a writer to feign transparency in the face of institutions lacking transparency. Twain repeatedly returned to his implicit assertion that journalism erases the individual’s importance, thereby privileging the newspaper’s collective reputation. As the mining boom and its “rough-and-tumble” atmosphere encouraged Twain’s mode of newspaper writing, the post-Civil War information economy allowed for Twain’s public performance to bring a face and figure to crowds. Before the recognizable image of Twain in a white suit and the news of his honorary degrees from Oxford and Yale, he transformed himself from a name on the Comstock to a figure on the lecture circuit. His transformation permitted the conspicuous moralizing that would separate the hoax writer in the West from the lecturer in the East. Further, his

fame and the multiple versions of Mark Twain it produced during his career demonstrated the proto-postmodern impulse to problematize widely accepted truth claims.

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<sup>1</sup> All references to Twain's work are from *The Oxford Mark Twain*, unless otherwise stated.

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### **Author Biography**

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Niki is in the third year of her PhD at the University of Edinburgh. Her research interests include, broadly, the history of American creative nonfiction and, specifically, the subjective journalist figure in literary journalism. Her dissertation is tentatively titled “These American Lives: The Performance of the Subjective Journalist Figure.”