

Humanizing the Other
Mark Twain, Bret Harte and the "Heathen Chinese": The Perils of Satire in 1876
By Philip Chin

The story of the production of "Ah Sin," the only stage play that was ever jointly written by Mark Twain and Bret Harte, highlighted the thin line that satirists run when they try to be edgy to seize the attention of the audience to educate them, but fail miserably.

Bret Harte, a New Yorker who had moved to California in 1853, had become the most famous literary man in America by 1870. He was known for his sympathies for racial minorities. In 1860, he was working as an assistant editor of a newspaper in Arcata, California, *The Northern Californian*, when news of the local massacre of from between 80 to 250 members of the Wiyot tribe of Native Americans in Humboldt County was reported. Since the editor was away, Harte took it upon himself to condemn the massacre by writing an editorial under the blood-curdling title of, "Indiscriminate Massacre of Indians: Women and Children Butchered.":

We do not extenuate. If the deed was committed by responsible parties, we will give place to any argument that may be offered in justification. But we can conceive of no palliation for woman and child slaughter. We can conceive of no wrong that a babe's blood can atone for. Perhaps we do not rightly understand the doctrine of 'extermination.' How a human being, with the faculty of memory, who could recall his own mother's gray hairs, who could remember how he had been taught to respect age and decrepitude, who had ever looked upon a helpless infant with a father's eye - could with cruel, un pitying hand carry out the 'extermination' that his brain had conceived - who could smite the mother and a child so wantonly and cruelly - few men can understand. What amount of suffering it takes to make a man a babe-killer, is a question for future moralists.

Neither age or sex had been spared. Little children and old women were mercilessly stabbed and their skulls crushed with axes. When the bodies were landed at Union, a more shocking and revolting spectacle never was exhibited to the eyes of a Christian and civilized people. Old women, wrinkled and decrepit, lay weltering in blood, their brains dashed out and dabbled with their long gray hair. Infants scarce a span long, with their faces cloven with hatchets and their bodies ghastly with wounds.

Bret Harte was forced to flee to San Francisco after the outraged local citizens of Humboldt County threatened his life. Nobody was ever arrested or tried for the massacre, such was the feelings against Native Americans in California.

Harte continued writing in San Francisco and became the editor of a literary magazine in 1868, the *Overland Monthly*, where his short story, *The Luck of Roaring Camp*, made his name known nationally as a writer of picturesque Western stories.

The work that brought him the most fame (and infamy) was a poem originally titled, *Plain Language from Truthful James*, printed in the *Overland Monthly* in 1870. It was meant to be a satire against the anti-Chinese attitudes and prejudices prevalent across the American West, especially among working class Irish-Americans. Two whites sit down for a card game with an apparently innocent Chinese dupe named Ah Sin with the intent of cheating him out of his money, but discover that the Chinese is an even better card sharp than they are:

Which I wish to remark,
And my language is plain,
That for ways that are dark
And for tricks that are vain,
The heathen Chinese is peculiar,
Which the same I would rise to explain.

Ah Sin was his name;
And I shall not deny,
In regard to the same,
What that name might imply;
But his smile it was pensive and childlike,
As I frequent remarked to Bill Nye.

It was August the third,
And quite soft was the skies;
Which it might be inferred
That Ah Sin was likewise;
Yet he played it that day upon William
And me in a way I despise.

Which we had a small game,
And Ah Sin took a hand:
It was Euchre. The same
He did not understand;
But he smiled as he sat by the table,
With the smile that was childlike and bland.

Yet the cards they were stocked
In a way that I grieve,
And my feelings were shocked
At the state of Nye's sleeve,
Which was stuffed full of aces and bowers,
And the same with intent to deceive.

But the hands that were played
By that heathen Chinese,
And the points that he made,
Were quite frightful to see, --
Till at last he put down a right bower,
Which the same Nye had dealt unto me.

Then I looked up at Nye,
And he gazed upon me;
And he rose with a sigh,
And said, "Can this be?
We are ruined by Chinese cheap labor," --
And he went for that heathen Chinese.

In the scene that ensued
I did not take a hand,
But the floor it was strewed
Like the leaves on the strand
With the cards that Ah Sin had been hiding,
In the game "he did not understand."

In his sleeves, which were long,
He had twenty-four packs, --
Which was coming it strong,
Yet I state but the facts;
And we found on his nails, which were taper,
What is frequent in tapers, -- that's wax.

Which is why I remark,
And my language is plain,
That for ways that are dark
And for tricks that are vain,
The heathen Chinese is peculiar, --
Which the same I am free to maintain.

The poem gained great popularity and was reprinted all across the United States under the title of, "The Heathen Chinese," making Bret Harte world famous. Much to Harte's great distress the poem was enthusiastically adopted by the very anti-Chinese groups and individuals that Harte had been trying to satirize. Phrases such as "We are ruined by Chinese cheap labor" and "heathen Chinese" were adopted in the national discussion about the Chinese. The poem also solidified the image of Chinese as deceitful and cunning in American popular culture, an image that has existed to this day. California Senator Eugene Casserley thanked Harte for providing a timely poem in opposition to Chinese labor. Allen Thurmann, the Democratic candidate for Vice-President of the United States in 1888, cited the poem in support of anti-Chinese immigration legislation. Harte would later say it was, "the worst poem I ever wrote, possibly the worst poem anyone ever wrote." He attempted to redeem the Chinese by presenting positive portrayals of them in his stories almost to the end of his life, notably in *Wan Lee, the Pagan* in 1874, *The Latest Chinese Outrage* in 1878, *The Queen of Pirate Isle* in 1886, *See Yup* in 1898, and the *Three Vagabonds of Trinidad* in 1900. None of these works ever gained as much attention or popularity as his earlier work.

That Harte had great sympathy for the Chinese is clear from in 1874 work "*Wan Lee, the Pagan*." The story is told in the first person. The white storyteller is invited by his Chinese friend, Hop Sing, a prominent San Francisco merchant, for a cup of tea at his place of business. Hop Sing, is

far unlike the object of contempt that was the stereotypical Chinese then popular in American literature.

Before I describe him, I want the average reader to discharge from his mind any idea of a Chinaman that he may have gathered from the pantomime. He did not wear beautifully scalloped drawers, fringed with little bells (I never met a Chinaman who did); he did not habitually carry his fore-finger extended before him at right angles with his body; nor did I ever hear him utter the mysterious sentence, "Ching a ring a ring chaw"; nor dance under any provocation. He was, on the whole, a rather grave, decorous, handsome gentleman. His complexion, which extended all over his head, except where his long pig-tail grew, was like a very nice piece of glazed brown paper- muslin. His eyes were black and bright, and his eyelids set at an angle of fifteen degrees; his nose straight and delicately formed; his mouth small, and his teeth white and clean. He wore a dark blue silk blouse, and in the streets, on cold days, a jacket of astrachan fur. He wore, also, a pair of drawers of blue brocade gathered tightly over his calves and ankles, offering a general sort of suggestion that he had forgotten his trousers that morning, but that, so gentlemanly were his manners, his friends had forborne to mention the fact to him. His manner was urbane, although quite serious. He spoke French and English fluently. In brief, I doubt if you could have found the equal of this Pagan shopkeeper among the Christian traders of San Francisco.

The writer finds that other prominent whites, including an editor and a federal judge, have also been invited to the tea. They are entertained by the most amazing magic show and conjuring act that any of them have ever seen by a Chinese named Wang, a professional conjuror. At the end of the performance, a baby appears, seemingly from beneath the ground from under a handkerchief that the writer provided. Hop Sing then solemnly announces that all of the white men should be godfathers to the young boy, who is named Wan Lee. The white men then dutifully pass around a handkerchief and contribute what money they have for the education and benefit of the baby, about \$100. When asked if Wan Lee is the son of Wang, Hop Sing replies with the Mexican American saying that was popular in California at the time as a non-response, "No sabe." This was in 1856.

Nearly ten years later, in 1865, while writing for the "Northern Star" newspaper in Klamath County, California, the writer receives a letter from Hop Sing asking if he'll accept Wan Lee as an apprentice in the newspaper trade. Wan Lee proves to be a mischievous little boy. Much of his early education was as a conjuror so he plays many tricks on the newspapermen.

As he imparted it to me, his had been a hard life. He had known scarcely any childhood: he had no recollection of a father or mother. The conjurer Wang had brought him up. He had spent the first seven years of his life in appearing from baskets, in dropping out of hats, in climbing ladders, in putting his little limbs out of joint in posturing. He had lived in an atmosphere of trickery and deception. He had learned to look upon mankind as dupes of their senses: in fine, if he had thought at all, he would have been a sceptic; if he had been a little older, he would have been a cynic; if he had been older still, he would have been a philosopher. As it was, he was a little imp. A good-natured imp it was, too,--an imp whose moral nature had never been awakened,--an imp up for a holiday, and willing to try virtue as a diversion. I don't know that he had any spiritual nature. He was very superstitious. He carried about with him a hideous little porcelain god, which he was in the habit of alternately reviling and propitiating. He was too intelligent for the commoner Chinese vices of stealing or gratuitous lying. Whatever discipline he practised was taught by his intellect.

The young boy is placed under the tutelage of a missionary and into the home of a widow with a young girl two years younger than the boy. "I wish I could add here, that she effected his conversion, and made him give up his porcelain idol. But I am telling a true story; and this little girl was quite content to fill him with her own Christian goodness, without letting him know that

he was changed. So they got along very well together,--this little Christian girl with her shining cross hanging around her plump, white little neck; and this dark little Pagan, with his hideous porcelain god hidden away in his blouse."

Harte made his feelings crystal clear about his sympathies for the Chinese when he wrote about the true events of 1869, when the fictional Wan Lee would have been about 13 years old, "There were two days of that eventful year which will long be remembered in San Francisco,--two days when a mob of her citizens set upon and killed unarmed, defenceless foreigners because they were foreigners, and of another race, religion, and color, and worked for what wages they could get. There were some public men so timid, that, seeing this, they thought that the end of the world had come. There were some eminent statesmen, whose names I am ashamed to write here, who began to think that the passage in the Constitution which guarantees civil and religious liberty to every citizen or foreigner was a mistake."

The writer is invited to the heavily guarded business of Hop Sing and taken to the basement where he first saw the infant Wan Lee:

It was dimly lighted; but there was something lying on the floor covered by a shawl. As I approached he drew the shawl away with a sudden gesture, and revealed Wan Lee, the Pagan, lying there dead.

Dead, my reverend friends, dead,--stoned to death in the streets of San Francisco, in the year of grace 1869, by a mob of half-grown boys and Christian school-children!

As I put my hand reverently upon his breast, I felt something crumbling beneath his blouse. I looked inquiringly at Hop Sing. He put his hand between the folds of silk, and drew out something with the first bitter smile I had ever seen on the face of that Pagan gentleman.

It was Wan Lee's porcelain god, crushed by a stone from the hands of those Christian iconoclasts!

The fame that Harte received because of the "Heathen Chinees" led to a major job offer. The University of California at Berkeley offered him the position of "Professor of Recent Literature and Curator of the Library and Museum" for an annual salary of \$3,600. Harte's refusal of the offer was widely reported. In 1871, Harte and his family moved to Newport, Rhode Island, on the East Coast. He was hired by the Atlantic Monthly for the enormous sum of \$10,000 a year (in terms of economic status, this would be the equivalent of nearly \$3 million in 2014 dollars). By 1872, his star was already starting to fade, and he was looking for more work. Clemens, in his 1906 autobiography, attributed this to Harte's spendthrift ways that had eaten through the entire fortune of \$10,000 in only a year.

Bret Harte and Samuel Clemens had first met in 1864 in San Francisco. They had a cantankerous relationship although they admired each other for many years. Harte, as editor of the Overland Monthly, had published fifteen substantial articles about Chinese immigrants in the first twenty-four issues of the magazine. Among the contributors to the magazine was Mark Twain. In letter from November 1870 from Samuel Clemens to Charles Henry Webb, Clemens' wrote, "Indeed Harte does soar, & I am glad of it, notwithstanding he & I are 'off,' these many months." Harte had read the manuscript for *The Innocents Abroad*, one of the books that established the brand name of Mark Twain internationally. Harte "...told me what passages, paragraphs & chapters to leave out--& I followed orders strictly. It was a kind thing for Harte to do, & I think I appreciated it. He praised the book so highly that I wanted him to review it early for the Overland & help the sale out there. I told my publisher. He ordered Bancroft to send Harte a couple of books before anybody else. Bancroft declined! I wrote Harte & enclosed an order on Bancroft for 2 book[s] &

directing that the bill be deducted from my [publishers]returns or sent to [me. Mr.]Bancroft 'preferred the money.' Good, wasn't it? {He wrote me the other day, asking me to help get him agency for my new book for Pacific & the Orient—which I didn't.} Well, sir, Harte wrote me the *most daintily contemptuous & insulting letter you ever read*—& what I want to know, is, where I was to blame? How's that?"

In 1876, Harte wrote to Clemens suggesting that they collaborate together in writing a play. Mark Twain had been enjoying success and healthy box office takings from his play, *Colonel Sellers*. Harte's play, *Two Men at Sandy Bar*, was also enjoying success, but less so than Mark Twain was. The Harte play had featured a brief scene with a Chinese character named Hop Sing. Harte typically reused several character names in his stories and plays, often with completely different personalities. In this play Hop Sing is a stereotypical Chinese laundryman who briefly appears in the play speaking pidgin. When one of the characters promises to pay him tomorrow, Hop Sing says bitterly, "Hop Sing. Me no likee 'to-mollow!' Me no likee 'nex time, John!' Allee time Melican man say, 'Chalkee up, John,' 'No smallee change, John,'—umph. Plenty foolee me!" In such a way Harte was trying to create sympathy for the character, despite using the conventionally accepted stereotype of Chinese speaking in pidgin English. This was recognizably a man complaining that he should be paid for the worth of his honest labor, something that all white Americans would ordinarily be sympathetic with.

Harte and Clemens both agreed that Charles Parsloe, the white man who'd portrayed Hop Sing in *Two Men at Sandy Bar* should have the title role of Ah Sin in the proposed play. Harte was obviously trying to redeem the Ah Sin character that he'd created in 1870 and turn it away from the wildly popular racist stereotype it had become that was being used to justify anti-Chinese violence and anti-immigration efforts.

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