

Personal Recollections of Joan of Arc

in Today's Classroom

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At a time when little in education seems to be standing still, Mark Twain's place in the American literary canon seems assured. However, the universal appeal of his writing, translated as it has been into more than seventy languages, has never extended to include his *Personal Recollections of Joan of Arc*. Long derided by virtually all critics, *Joan* has been read only by the most ardent Twain fans; it has rarely been taught, and then only with limited success. This is unfortunate, for it contains a wealth of possibilities for today's classroom.

The story of Joan of Arc as told in the book by her page and secretary, Sieur Louis de Conte, to his great-great-grand-nephews and -nieces met with a generally favorable reception when it was published in 1896 (Budd, 140). Not only were Victorians fascinated by the Middle Ages, but the historical Joan was currently undergoing sanctification, prior to her canonization by the Roman Catholic Church. Critics have not been so kind, however. Thought to be Clemens's desperate effort to ward off his deepening despair, *Joan* has been considered Victorian sentimentalism at its worst, a mixture of medievalism and Southwestern humor that was little more than, as Bernard DeVoto put it, a "capitulation to romance" written by a "Missouri democrat on leave from his trade" (280, 282).

In recent years, however, this work has received more careful scholarly attention. J. D. Stahl, for example, profitably examined the fusion of Joan and the narrator. More recently, Bruce Michelson considered the work in the light of Mark Twain's rebellion against consistency, reminding us that Twain's late works often "turn against themselves, subverting the very themes they champion at the start" (175). Studies like these serve to broaden our perspective on *Joan*, and they often reveal a previously undiscovered richness.

Elsewhere I have argued that a reading unhampered by expectations

generated in earlier scholarship can reveal Twain's novel to be not an aberration in the Twain canon but a work that is characteristically ironic. Read this way, *Joan* is very much in line with other late fiction by Twain: it is an expression of, not a failed attempt to counteract, Clemens's growing pessimism. Certainly, what critics have seen is literally there, but the story de Conte tells and the implications created by the way he tells it are markedly different. In this, it is not unlike Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. In her pathbreaking work *Was Huck Black? Mark Twain and African-American Voices*, Shelley Fisher Fishkin explores the doubleness of Huck's story, reminding us that "Twain devoted a major portion of his writing to the project of helping his reader learn to avoid the sin of literalness" (61). We cannot take seriously Twain's admonition that the reader not seek a moral in *Huckleberry Finn*; by the same token, I would argue, we are naïve to assume that *Joan* is merely another record of the exploits of the Maid of Orleans.

This doubleness in *Joan*, which goes well beyond the dual narrative voices of the young and the old de Conte noted by previous scholars, is a feature of the work that makes it especially useful in the classroom. Undergraduate students are often inclined to read literally, and their study of this work will give them opportunities to gain experience with ironic discourse. For example, although scholars have generally found the attitude of the narrator de Conte to be uncritically worshipful of Joan, students—perhaps especially female students—will be able to see that de Conte is surprisingly unable to accommodate his heroine's non-traditional perspective: while telling a story that is clearly intended to be a paean to Joan, his uncritical praise of her has the ironic effect of diminishing both her character and her mission. Such a collision of male and female views rarely fails to interest students, as it yields the pedagogical bonus of raising the question of male vs. female perspectives.

A second reason for using this text in the classroom is its fascinating critical history in which both its genre and its value as literature have been called into question. While many literary works have been the subjects of such critical discussion, undergraduate students, aware of their own lack of expertise, often take the easy way out and select one critic with whom to agree. *Joan*, however, is another matter. Seldom has there been a work about which opinion was so universally negative but that nonetheless managed to remain in print. Unless they, too,

want to dismiss *Joan* out of hand (and most will not), students cannot simply parrot the words of someone else but must construct their own arguments. Consequently, working with this particular text encourages student participation in the critical discourse of literary study.

My belief in the work's effectiveness as a teaching tool stems in part from the changing nature of the classroom, where more and more of us are finding that we must rethink the way we teach our students. In the literature classroom the emphasis is shifting gradually but inexorably away from the traditional exposure to "great works," with the teacher presenting background information and modeling a literary analysis that students will learn to emulate, toward an active, collaborative learning that takes place as the student confronts the text directly. My conviction that *Joan* can be used to foster this learning process grows out of my experience at Alverno College, a four-year liberal arts college for women and a pioneer in teaching abilities that students need for lifelong learning. I designed my unit on *Joan* for junior and senior English majors and minors with an eye toward strengthening their abilities to analyze, respond to aesthetically, and communicate about a literary work. *Joan*, one of Twain's longest—and, I would argue, more complex—works, might prove daunting to students less experienced and thus less prepared for the demands of this particular text. The student with limited analytic ability, for instance, might pay little attention to de Conte's descriptions of the military incidents. Reasoning that this is a story about Joan of Arc, she might focus only on what de Conte says about Joan, thus missing much of the work's irony. Similarly, the student less used to responding aesthetically to a literary work might simply decide that de Conte is too long-winded to suit her and thus fail altogether to respond. A student more advanced in these abilities, however, should not only be able to make connections among her responses to other works, but should be considering literary works as expressions of values, those of the writer and his or her society. That is, like the beginning student, she might find deficiencies in de Conte's ability to tell his story, but she should be able to explore and articulate more clearly the implications of this shortcoming. The advanced student might also be more attuned to the values inherent in de Conte's curious attitudes toward the war in which he finds himself a participant.

Because this is a long work, I planned a relatively long unit, designed around five two-hour classes. My own undergraduate experience of

sometimes having to read twelve to fifteen novels in a semester-long course convinced me that one may learn plot summaries that way, but not necessarily how to read literature. More time spent on an individual work, with a variety of classroom experiences to accommodate students' different learning styles, does far more to prepare students to become effective readers.

Students' initial responses to *Joan*, perhaps shared first in small groups, lead into a preliminary discussion of the work during the first class. Invariably, questions arise about matters that puzzle the students. Many are historical. Did Joan of Arc really exist? Why didn't anyone from France save her? Some concern the author. How did Mark Twain get interested in Joan of Arc? I thought he wrote books that children could read, but what kid could read this one? At this point, I refrain from attempting to answer any of their questions, for I would rather have students view me as another kind of student, one perhaps more experienced than they are, but one who does not necessarily have all the answers. Rather than let all questions drop unanswered, however, I do make an effort to see what another student may think or know about the matter. Active, collaborative learning engages students in the discussion; lecturing from one to whom they feel inferior often shuts them down. Moreover, I never fail to be surprised about what this or that student has seen in a literary text or knows about a writer's life and works. Such a gathering of information can be rich. So the questions I use to guide discussion are these: What do you know about Twain? About his works? About this work? And what might it help you to know about Twain? About his works? About this work? Only after I have exhausted the students' store of information and suggestions do I provide any of my own, and even then I try to limit myself to that which is pertinent to our study and which they could not quickly or easily obtain for themselves. I try to avoid saying anything that they might regard as dictating what should be their ultimate response to the work.

At some point in this first class, students do some close reading of particular pages. With *Joan*, the pretextual matter is a valuable place to start. When asked to consider the title, for instance, students are reminded that these are not Joan's recollections, but recollections *about* Joan by Sieur Louis de Conte, her page and secretary. Students first observe the layers of opacity through which we receive this tale: Clemens's sources; Clemens himself; de Conte's manuscript, designated

“unpublished” on the title page; and, finally, the manuscript’s translation by one Jean François Alden. They then note the repeated insistence on historical truth, with a curious disclaimer at the end of the translator’s note. By this time they begin to wonder what sort of story they are being told. I have noted elsewhere how this opening material induces skepticism, especially when it is immediately followed by the first lines of the text itself, where we learn that de Conte is writing at the age of eighty-two, when events that he witnessed have “receded deeper and deeper into the past and [grown] ever more strange and wonderful and divine and pathetic” (2). Students, in the course of careful reading, observe their own growing skepticism.

In the second class, analysis is preeminent as we apply frameworks with which students are already familiar. These might be the always useful New Critical, or formalist, framework, or it might be one that asks them to consider literature as a message from author to reader, with possible areas of “noise,” or “static,” in both text and reader. Taking this perspective of literature as communication reveals that de Conte’s narration is problematic, for his limited and possibly unreliable abilities as a storyteller serve to muddle his message. Another perspective might be an approach that asks them to regard literature as a protest against, or affirmation of, the society it depicts—in this case, that of fifteenth-century France. Application of this framework also discloses confusion in de Conte’s tale; although the narrator’s praises of Joan seem effusive, he manages at the same time to undercut the very qualities that he praises.

As part of the activities in the third class, students are asked to stretch their analytic abilities still further as we discuss a topic or question of critical interest. For instance, we might profitably take up the question of genre. Is this work biography? History? Romance? Some combination of these? Sharing some early reviews with the students assures them that the book’s genre has indeed been a matter of some debate. Students should see that de Conte’s claims that his tale is “true” history are called into question by his own assertion that history is “second-hand information that we get from our fathers” (11). Moreover, his habit of lying, altering his story as he tells it—and telling us he is doing so—only increases our skepticism about the “history” that he is giving us. Further muddling the issue is the fact that de Conte applies the “historian” to the Paladin, a teller of blatantly outrageous stories (117). Students who say this work is not exactly history are tempted to

conclude that its genre is biography until they consider how much of the time Joan completely disappears from the text, while the narrator pops in and out with dizzying frequency. Is it a romance? De Conte scoffs at the romanticizing of events, as when he speaks dismissively of an old fan and rusty sword discovered in a castle wall as “pathetic relics” (189). No one, however, could be more of a romantic than the narrator when he speaks with reverence of the power of Joan’s sword, also found, rusty and in need of cleaning, buried in a wall.

Another fertile area of discussion is whether de Conte and Clemens are one and the same. Most critics, perhaps relying on the identical initials of *Sieur Louis de Conte* and *Samuel Langhorne Clemens*, along with their professed admiration of Joan, have suggested that they are. I believe that the relationship is far more complex. For example, while de Conte may share Clemens’s enthusiasm for Joan, he possesses many other characteristics that are completely his own, traits that Mark Twain parodies elsewhere. And, although de Conte and Clemens seem to share a deepening cynicism about human nature, de Conte is never aware that he himself exemplifies the very qualities of human nature that fill him with such despair. Because grounds exist for disagreement as to the relationship between Clemens and de Conte, the subject can produce lively class discussion. Some of de Conte’s ambivalences are like Twain’s own: on the one hand, the narrator can scorn the ceremonies of the court, “this cheap spectacle, this tinsel show, with its small King and his butterfly dukelets”; and, on the other, he can admire the “long and imposing” coronation of that same king, a coronation that has “everything that is right for such occasions” (108, 109). (Students might enjoy seeing photographs indicating a similar duality in Clemens—for example, one showing him bare-chested on his fiftieth birthday, and another wearing the academic regalia in which he received his honorary doctorate from Oxford.) Evidence against their being one and the same, however, lies in de Conte’s reaction to events of the war. He regards it as theater, a spectacle in which he is privileged to participate. He uses adjectives like “gorgeous,” “splendid,” “fine,” and “pleasant” without irony; yet to the reader, they can seem heavily ironic in the context of the human slaughter he describes. While de Conte’s view of war as adventure does mimic that of many Victorian and Edwardian males (Adams, 73–84), his enthusiastic commentary on the bloodshed is not consistent with other of Twain’s writings on war, writings that more obviously expose war’s savagery and idiocy. (“The

War Prayer" works well in this context, and students rarely miss the irony there.) The ultimate effect of the gusto with which de Conte details the human destruction resulting from Joan's military battles is to undercut his heroine; the reader begins to question her military mission, as well as her heart, which, as de Conte rhapsodizes, is "overflowing with the joys and enthusiasms of war" (184).

Thorough discussion of such issues will inform students' work on panel presentations that I assign for the next class, and I leave the second part of the present class for students to prepare in small groups. At some time before the next class I will have supplied each group of four students with one or two short articles summarizing one of the more accessible current critical theories, asking them to read the articles before the next meeting. For example, I may ask a group to explain a theoretical framework (feminist, psychoanalytic, reader-response, or speech-act, for instance) and discuss its applicability to *Joan*, making it clear that I do not expect that they will be experts. During this class time, each group works through the new framework, while I move among them to clarify points, answer questions, and so on.

In the fourth class, the student panels present their findings. On this day the focus is on analysis and communication. Students' applications of the assigned critical theories vary according to the complexity of the framework and to the level of their own skills of analysis, but most enjoy the challenge and are able to make cogent observations about the text. A group working with feminist criticism, for example, may observe the maudlin sentimentality and uncritical admiration with which the narrator seems to view Joan, impeding his observation of her real strengths. Perceptive students may notice, in addition, that while de Conte is relating the story of his heroine, he is also very busy telling us about himself. And isn't he, then, telling us about ourselves as well? A panel covering psychoanalytic criticism will have much to work with here, for de Conte's attitudes toward Joan are complex and bound up with his own psychological makeup. Even without knowledge of Victorian attitudes toward women, students will be able to link de Conte's having been raised in the company of males to his sometimes ambivalent attitudes toward his heroine, and, in fact, toward his experiences in general. Students applying a reader-response framework to this text can focus on how much of each student's response to the text is a product of her own culture.

Finally, an examination of de Conte's story from the perspective of

speech-act theory is extremely fruitful. No matter how limited their experience with direct literary analysis, students all know what they expect from a good storyteller; they find it easy to create their own criteria for narration and then to judge de Conte's performance as narrator. A reader usually expects a narrator-biographer in a published text to be, at the very least, reliable, honest, and competent; de Conte has deficiencies in all of these areas. In many ways, he seems the ultimately unreliable narrator: he is prejudiced, superstitious, credulous, garrulous, hyperbolic, and sentimental. He is also dishonest. Even when he vows to avoid further deception, he falls into his habit of protecting Joan from the truth when he incorporates verbatim into the text of *Joan* what appears as an epigraph to chapter 6 of *Pudd'nhead Wilson* (ostensibly from Pudd'nhead Wilson's calendar): de Conte finds himself "opening up with a small lie, of course, for habit is habit, and not to be flung out of the window by any man, but coaxed downstairs a step at a time" (*Joan*, 49). His deceptions are numerous enough that his repeated claims to be telling a "true" history merely increase our skepticism. In addition, he admits to a failing memory, reminding us that "one's mind wanders around here and there and yonder, when one is old" (290). Finally, while at times he irritates his readers with rambling digressions, elsewhere he casually dismisses events that the reader finds significant.

The group presentations prepare students for the final activity of this unit, a consideration of the work's literary merit and the creation of a new aesthetic response. To focus discussion, I prepare and bring to class a series of overhead transparencies containing some of the more entertaining paragraphs to be found in the criticism on *Joan*. Given the students' now fairly comprehensive work with the text, they may be even more surprised that criticism has found so little of value in it. If students have read other works by Twain—*Huckleberry Finn*, for instance—interesting comparisons are possible. John Seelye has written of a structural similarity between the two works ([xiii–xiv]) noting that the first two-thirds of both works are "loose and rambling," with a severely restricted focus in the final third. *Huck Finn* lapses into "farci-cal fantasy," while in *Joan*, "Innocence . . . is put on trial by Evil incarnate" ([xiv]). Other correspondences exist as well, especially if, as I do, you regard the narrator, and not Joan, as the main character. Both Huck and de Conte, for example, are naïve narrators who seem to have diffi-

culty applying what they have learned from past experience to new situations. And, just as Huck will not be able to escape civilization by lighting out for the Territory, de Conte cannot escape into mythmaking, for he has mythologized Joan out of his own values, the very values he wishes to flee. Inevitably, de Conte, like Huck, must take his own “civilization” with him.

With a new and more complex awareness of *Joan*, students now write aesthetic responses to bring to the unit’s fifth and final class. They may or may not have revised their original opinions of the work, but they are now able to write out of a context that has been made considerably richer. My experience is that now the students are able to demonstrate awareness of the connections between their work in the course and their own lives, addressing this question: What has Twain revealed to you about what it is to be human?

In this final class I assess students’ individual learning, creating a context in which the students are able to demonstrate their command of this literary work. For instance, I may set up the situation in which it has been announced that because of funding difficulties, the Mark Twain Project is considering the cancellation of its projected publication of the California Edition of *Joan*, reasoning that it is one of Twain’s least-known and least-valued works. I would ask the students to write a letter to the Project arguing for or against its retention in the publication schedule. Such a letter would assess each student’s knowledge of *Joan*, her ability to construct a coherent argument, and her competence in managing the conventions of writing.

Use of Twain’s *Joan* in a variety of activities that focus on developing students’ abilities makes the classroom an exciting place as students are empowered to take an active role in the discourse of literary studies. Robert Scholes has pointed out that “reading and writing are important because we read and write our world as well as our texts, and are read and written by them in turn” (xi). Given that both our world and our classrooms are changing, we need to consider using Twain’s works in new ways. In my students’ exploration of *Personal Recollections of Joan of Arc*, I find that, above all, they come away with a sense of the complexity not only of that particular work, but of the writer who called himself Mark Twain. In making that discovery, they have learned more about the extraordinary complexity of their own world. Perhaps that, after all, is the most important lesson we teach.

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