The Feminist Essentialism of Mark Twain: Eve as the Empowered Feminine

by Sara Krastins

At the turn of the 19th century, feminism was erupting in the United States. Women were no longer willing to passively accept the guidelines and expectations that had been put in place for them by patriarchal structures. Rather than remain silent, like they had been encouraged to do their entire lives, women were demanding more rights. The suffragist movement was not only about the right to vote; it also included the fight for more rights in all aspects of life. Women actively fought for their rights while simultaneously expressing their intellectual capacities. Although a great deal of men during this time opposed the demands of these women, there were many individuals who supported and fought alongside them; Mark Twain was one of these individuals. He was both an avid feminist and an essentialist. In addition to believing in rights for women, he also believed that there are inherent differences between men and women. These differences did not favor one sex over another; they merely existed. The impact 19th and 20th century feminism had on Twain's life and writing is clearly illustrated in Twain's retelling of the creation story in *The Complete Diaries of Adam and Eve*, which depicts a curious and intellectually capable version of Eve. In the diaries, Eve's discovery of fire, her role in naming, her awareness of grammar, and her free expression all illustrate Twain's feminist, essentialist beliefs.

Probably the most significant goal of the late 19th and early 20th century feminist movement was the fight for women's suffrage. In her article "Women's Suffrage Movement," Tina Gianoulis informs readers that the woman's suffrage movement started at "the Seneca Falls Convention, held in New York State on July 19 and 20, 1848…[and was] attended by about 250 women and 40 men[;] the convention addressed many issues of women's rights, including the right to vote" (Gianoulis). The fight for women's suffrage was neither easy nor short. It took seventy-two years after the Seneca Falls Convention before the nineteenth amendment was ratified and women were federally granted the right to vote. The efforts of the anti-suffragist movement were widespread—women were often ridiculed and repressed by men as well as by fellow women, who believed in alternative methods of gaining equal rights. In his essay "Never a Fight of Woman Against Man: What Textbooks Don't Say About Women's Suffrage," Joe C. Miller recognizes that at the same time the suffragists were campaigning for their cause, "the 'antis,' as they were called, testified before legislatures, published articles, and newsletters, held public meetings, and eventually debated the suffragists" (Miller 438-439). Gianoulis emphasizes that the little press that the convention did receive was "mostly condescending and contemptuous with the exception of those by some progressive journalists such as the famous abolitionist Frederick Douglass, who had attended the event himself" (Gianoulis). Although this convention is often regarded today as a significant landmark in United States history, it's important to note that it was largely debased by the general population during this period.

In addition to anti-suffragist groups, the women's suffrage movement encountered many other obstacles prior to ratification. During the Civil War, the suffragists partnered with abolitionists in hopes that when the war was won, African Americans would be granted full citizenship and women would be granted it as well (Gianoulis). However, this was not the case. Gianoulis notes that to the dismay of many, "when the war ended, many national leaders continued to argue against giving women the vote. Many suffragists regarded this as a betrayal, and they reacted with bitter disappointment" (Gianoulis). Despite the fact that both women and African Americans experienced oppression, this renunciation of support caused a divide between the suffragist and abolitionist movements. Following the initial feeling of betrayal, suffragists were once again let down by their leaders in 1870 when "the

fifteenth amendment to the U.S. Constitution was passed, granting the right to vote to Black men, with no mention of women" (Gianoulis), fifty years before women would be given the right to vote. When Mark Twain was writing *The Complete Diaries of Adam and Eve* at the turn of the century, new wave feminism and the women's suffrage movement were in full swing. Twain's own relationship with the movement is evident in his writing during this time.

Twain was not only a supporter of suffrage, but he was also an activist. On January 20, 1901 at the annual meeting of the Hebrew Technical School for Girls, Mark Twain gave a speech titled "Votes for Women" that empowered the young women in the audience and encouraged change in the world. Twain ended his speech with this statement:

> I should like to see the time come when women shall help to make laws. I should like to see that whiplash, the ballot, in the hands of women. As for this city's government, I don't want to say much, except that it is a shame—a shame; but if I should live twenty-five years longer—and there is no reason why I shouldn't—I think I'll see women handle the ballot. If women had the ballot today, the state of things in this town would not exist. (Twain)

Not only did Twain offer support to the women in the audience, but he also condemned the government's failure to grant women the right to vote. In addition to his outright activism and outspoken nature in favor of women, Twain also used his writing, specifically *The Complete Diaries of Adam and Eve*, to positively represent women in the literary sphere.

In addition to highlighting Twain's feminist perspective, *The Complete Diaries of Adam and Eve* also illustrates an essentialist understanding of gender. In her essay "Ways to Think About Gender," Sally O'Driscoll asserts that unlike a person's sex—their biological make up—"'gender' is not something absolute, but is a shifting set of characteristics, [used] to compare the ways men and women behave in different cultures" (O'Driscoll 3). Essentialism is based on the concept that there are inherent differences between the two genders that should not be ignored. As O'Driscoll notes, "the essentialist position tends to see the sexed body as crucial, and gender characteristics as innate—as 'essentially' part of the biological body rather than separate from it." (O'Driscoll 1). This does not necessarily mean that one gender is better than the other, only that males and females are different in visible, biologically innate ways.

Eve's free expression throughout *The Complete Diaries of Adam and Eve* further asserts Twain's advocacy for free speech for women (i.e., the right to vote). *The Complete Diaries of Adam and Eve* gives a strong voice to a female character, something that was rarely seen during this time. Through her diary entries, Eve expresses her thoughts, feelings, intellectual curiosity, and wonder. By illustrating Eve through her first person perspective as well as through the eyes of an oppressive male (Adam), Twain highlights the negative treatment of women and their ability to prove their oppressors wrong. Twain illustrates Eve's critical thinking abilities through her diary and in turn represents the intelligence of women in general. Eve's first diary entry is nine pages long, showing an extensive thought process. It is clear that Twain is trying to establish Eve as a thoughtful and an intellectually curious individual. In her first moments of existence, Eve is able to come to the conclusion, "if I am an experiment, am I the whole of it? No, I think not; I think the rest of it is part of it. I am the main part of it, but I think the rest of it has its share in the matter" (Twain 95). Through this depiction of Eve as an intelligent being, Twain could be asserting that women have the intellectual capability to reason and understand their world.

Twain also rejects misogynistic criticisms of women when he addresses the nature of Eve's emotional disposition. Twain's depiction of Eve's ability to understand her emotions goes against the typical 19th and 20th century image of women as hysterical and incapable of dealing with their emotions. At one point Eve writes, "I cried a little, which was natural, I suppose, for one of my age" (Twain 103). Eve's nonchalance about crying challenges the idea of women as emotionally inept. In her article, "The Hysterical Woman: Sex Roles and Role Conflict in 19th Century America" Carol Smith-Rosenberg notes that since the 19th century, "hysteria has been seen as characteristically female—the hysterical woman the embodiment of a perverse or hyper femininity" (Smith-Rosenberg 653). Eve's realization that her crying is natural exposes Twain's essentialist perspective, as it is clear that Adam and

Eve's level of emotional-sensitivity is different. Adam gives little insight into how he is feeling when he writes in his diary. Instead, his entries are limited to factual, detached observations like, "been examining the great waterfall. It is the finest thing on the estate, I think" (Twain 5). Adam is much less expressive than Eve, which is clear in the differing lengths and specificity of their diary entries. For instance, when Eve refers to her crying as natural, she is simply illustrating the innate differences between men and women. Twain shows no indication as to whether or not these differences imply weakness because he does not believe they do. Twain simply wishes to identify that there are differences between these two genders and re-contextualize "crying" as a neutral feminine trait.

Twain's feminist beliefs are further illustrated in the chapter when Eve discovers fire. Historically, the discovery of fire was one of the most important occurrences for mankind, as it provided light, warmth, and opportunities for new cooking and agricultural methods. Although fire was never mentioned in the original Genesis story, Twain chose to include this discovery in his retelling of the creation story. In Eve's Diary, she recalls:

> I laid a dry stick on the ground and tried to bore a hole in it with another one, in order to carry out a scheme that I had, and soon I got an awful fright. A thin, transparent, bluish film rose out of the hole, and I dropped everything and ran! I thought it was a spirit, and I was so frightened… Suddenly the name of it occurred to me, though I had never heard of it before. It was fire! (Twain 141-145)

On her own, Eve discovers fire accidentally. She claims that she was originally trying to "carry out a scheme" (141); here, Twain could be implying that Eve's curiosity led to her discovery of fire. Not only is Eve the person to discover fire, she also immediately knows the name of her discovery. Twain is positively presenting female intellectual curiosity as well as highlighting the inherent intelligence of women. Twain's choice to have Eve discover fire could potentially be advocating for women's education, by highlighting Eve's innate intelligence and its ability to flourish when given the freedom to do so.

Twain's essentialist perspective is shown when he further presents the intrinsic female intelligence by highlighting Eve's grammatical awareness. When Eve discovers that Adam is a man, she quickly understands that she must use different pronouns for him. In her diary Eve writes, "If this reptile is a man, it isn't an *it*, is it? That wouldn't be grammatical, would it? I think it would be *he*. Think so. In that case one would parse it thus: nominative, *he*; dative, *him*; possessive, *his'n*" (Twain 115). Eve understands there are differences between her and Adam, and she illustrates this with her pronoun assignment. This further highlights Twain's essentialist perspective, as Twain establishes that even Eve recognizes the difference between Adam and Eve, and these differences must be established by the assignment of separate pronouns. When attempting to assign a pronoun to Adam, Eve quickly realizes that Adam is a man and not like the other animals in Paradise. In her article "Hierarchical Naming in Milton's *Paradise Lost*," Rebecca Cantor reveals that as a result of assigning these masculine pronouns, "Eve quickly appreciates that her labeling of this creature means something. She can no longer treat the man the same way she treats all of the other animals" (Cantor 69). The realization that different pronouns must be used to address Adam and Eve lays the groundwork for the continuous essentialist nuances throughout the rest of the diaries.

The role of naming in *The Complete Diaries of Adam and Eve* was inspired by the hierarchical power that naming gave Adam and Eve in John Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Cantor highlights that as a fan of Milton's, "Twain was not only influenced by Milton's subject, but also by the weight he placed on the significance and impact of naming. In *Paradise Lost*, Milton established a system of hierarchy-based naming that Twain later inverted in his own versions of the creation story" (Cantor 65). Naming is also used in *The Complete Diaries of Adam and Eve* to empower the female character. Cantor argues that generally, the hierarchical nature of naming in *Paradise Lost* "requires transference of power from someone powerful to someone less so" (Cantor 66). In *The Complete Diaries*, Eve names herself, as Adam expresses in his diary: "The new creature says its name is Eve. That is all right, I have no objections. Says it is to call it by when I want it to come. I said it was superfluous" (Twain 17). Cantor believes that Eve's naming of herself "is a significant sign of empowerment. Adam *tries* to undercut her

power by saying that the name is unnecessary, but Eve insists" (Cantor 68). Adam eventually accepts Eve's self-naming and calls her by that name for the rest of his diary. In addition to naming herself, Eve names many other places and animals in Paradise. Following Twain's essentialist point of view, the blindly pragmatic Adam is slow to understand the practicality of naming. He struggles to see why naming is important, especially because naming does not come naturally to him the way it does to Eve. Instead, when Adam does try to name things, like Cain, he gives him a scientific name "Kangaroorum Adamiensis" instead of a practical name like one Eve would give.

Naming further serves as a tool of empowerment for women when it becomes evident that Adam is much less proficient at naming. Eve feels proud of her naming abilities. She writes:

> I have taken all the work of naming things off his hands, and this has been a great relief to him, for he has no gift in that line, and is evidently very grateful. He can't think of a rational name to save him, but I do not let him see that I am aware of this defect (Twain 119).

Eve believes she is doing Adam a favor by naming everything in order to protect him from the embarrassment of his defect. According to Cantor, Twain shows that Eve is not just naming aimlessly, as she notes that "Adam lacks the skill, making her feel powerful" (Cantor 69). In this sense, naming is both a representation of the innate power that woman has over man as well as the female ability to recognize this power.

In addition to the ways that Twain highlights Eve's innate power, he also depicts Adam and Eve as completely different beings, furthering asserting his essentialist beliefs. The characters are described in different ways and behave in different ways. In her article "Gender Ideology in the Diary of Adam and Eve by Mark Twain," Paramita Ayuningtyas notes that Adam "is described as a practical man—a character labeled as masculine. He judges things in paradise based on their usefulness" (Ayuningtyas 371). This is part of the reason why Adam has a difficult time understanding the naming because he sees it as a purposeless act. Eve writes that Adam "talks very little. Perhaps it is because he is not bright, and is sensitive about it and wishes to conceal it. It is such a pity that he should feel so, for brightness is nothing; it is in his heart that the value lies" (Twain 131). Eve's reflection not only tells the reader about Adam, but as importantly, offers insight about Eve herself. Ayuningtyas notes that Eve has different priorities; she is more focused on emotional intelligence: For instance, she assumes that Adam is sensitive about his inability to name the animals, she is constantly enamored with the beauty of Paradise, and she explores her world. Every day, Eve admires the "prettiness" of Paradise, while Adam thinks about building a shelter to protect him from the rain (Ayuningtyas 371).

Their dissimilar reactions to Cain further exhibit their divergent existences within the world. Eve has motherly instincts, a characteristic that would be most closely associated with women. When Cain is born, Adam observes, "the coming of the creatures seems to have changed her whole nature and made her unreasonable about experiments. She thinks more of it than she does any of the other animals, but is not able to explain why" (Twain 57). Immediately, Eve has a motherly attachment to Cain. In comparison, Adam has no relationship with the child. Instead, Adam spends his time trying to understand what the creature is. This further alludes to the differences in the ways that Eve and Adam interact with their worlds: While Eve leads with her heart, Adam spends his time trying to understand the practicality of Cain. At one point, Adam writes, "if it dies, I will take it apart and see what its arrangements are" (Twain 63). Adam has no emotional attachment to Cain, only the desire to understand how it (Cain) works. Adam and Eve's polarizing reactions to Cain only further assert Twain's essentialist perspective, that there are inherent differences between these two beings.

Although Twain makes these distinctions between the pair, he never identifies certain traits as better than others. He simply identifies these traits, noting that they exist. And although it appears as though Eve is more positively represented throughout the entirety of *The Complete Diaries of Adam and Eve*, Twain ends by reinforcing his point that there are inherent differences between man and woman, and that ultimately both genders are equally important. Eve's final diary entry reads, "for he is strong, I am weak, I am not so necessary to him as he is to me—

life without him would not be life; how could I endure it?" (Twain 197). In the end, Eve values Adam's differences and believes these traits are what make him so necessary to her. In Eve's last words, Twain solidifies his essentialist perspective, as after the Fall, Eve writes, "I think I love him merely because he is mine and is masculine" (Twain 193).

Although gender characteristics may be essential, Twain rejects the idea that female gender characteristics should be interpreted as negative or lesser. The impact that 19th and 20th century feminism had on Twain's life and writing is particularly evident in Twain's retelling of the creation story in *The Complete Diaries of Adam and Eve*. Eve discovering fire, the role of naming, Eve's grammar awareness, and Eve's free expression all illustrate Twain's feminist and essentialist beliefs. It is Twain's clear distinction between Adam and Eve's defining characteristics that sets the stage for Twain's essentialist perspective that men and women are different; still, he seems to reason that there is no true hierarchy of gender.

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