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Cannibalism as Satire in Twain and Tom Wolfe

by Walter Phelps

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Tom Wolfe has several traits in common with Samuel Clemens—better known as Mark Twain. Both developed their writing skills in the ranks of journalism. Wolfe did his apprentice work on a large metropolitan daily, The New York Herald Tribune. Twain found newspaper work on the western frontier. Both developed great interest in their worlds and the inventions of their times. Twain was a steamboat captain who wrote about the wonders of his age, such as the mighty Mississippi. He was fascinated by invention and became enmeshed in projects. Wolfe has written expert commentaries on souped-up cars, the drug culture, “right stuff” aviators, and modern painting and architecture. Wolfe’s admiration for Twain even led him so far as to adopt Twain’s style of dress, the white suit, for his early public appearances.

Two works which reveal the striking similarities between Twain and Wolfe—and, indeed, Wolfe’s literary debt to Twain—are Twain’s Cannibalism in the Cars and Wolfe’s Mau-Mauing the Flak Catchers. In Cannibalism in the Cars, Twain tells of meeting a stranger on December 19, 1853. The stranger recounts a journey he made by train from St. Louis to Chicago. In the course of the journey, the train encountered a raging snowstorm that eventually left the passengers stranded and helpless. Hunger, indeed survival, was the problem, but this was soon solved. A “candidate” was selected through parliamentary procedure and the democratic process of majority rule, and was then eaten. This “parliamentary cannibalism” minimized the suffering and guaranteed survival until the storyteller—the only one left—“resigned.”

Tom Wolfe’s story of cannibalism, Mau-Mauing the Flak-Catchers, takes place in a California ghetto in the twentieth century. The local welfare populace is alarmed by the news that federal funds are going to be withdrawn. These funds are their source of survival. A delegation calls on the local government office of the poverty program and makes its grievances known. They encounter a lower-level bureaucrat who attempts to answer their questions. The confrontation turns into a verbal battle—a mau-mauing of the official. He takes all the flak and suffers the infliction of moral wounds; indeed, they psychologically eat him up. The whole conflict ends following this ritualized “chewing out” with the promise that a higher official will be contacted the following day.

Though these satiric tales may appear, on the surface, to be widely dissimilar, they both employ the ancient ritual of cannibalism to satirize
nineteenth and twentieth century political rituals. Twain and Wolfe have drawn on this ancient ritual to comment wryly on the bureaucratic justice of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

In both works external forces threaten survival. In the nineteenth century, it is nature, a snow storm, which places the travelers in danger. In the twentieth century the forces of poverty place the ghetto residents in the predicament where denial of funds threatens their existence. In the twentieth century “the system” has replaced nature.

Twain employs the ritual of cannibalism to suggest the follies of democratic and parliamentary procedures—if taken too far. Cannibalism is the only means of survival available to Twain’s passengers, but it cannot be undertaken without “propriety.” Thus, when the awesome moment is upon them, they (like their ancient predecessors) resort to ritual in order to act. The words that institute the ritual are spoken: “Gentlemen—it cannot be delayed any longer.” Protocol is followed precisely. Nominations are made. Objections are heard. Discussion is held, and votes are taken. All the right stuff has been said and done in order, presumably, to arrive at the correct choice. Twain makes us aware of how even presumably civilized human beings of the nineteenth century seek to cloak their basest needs and desires in “respectability.”

Wolfe depicts the action taken by the ghetto residents in similar ritualistic terms in Mau-Mauing the Flak Catchers. The “Samoan” mau-mauers may have been chosen by Wolfe for the reverberations of their highly ritualistic Polynesian culture. The “Samoans” who take part in the mau-mauing are enormous and are dressed in similar costume-like garb. They carry ornate canes which they use in ritualistic, rhythmic fashion. “They were like the original unknown terror,” Wolfe writes. The assemblage of these persons inaugurates the ritual, and when they enter the poverty program office, their presence conveys a message.

The furnishings of the poverty office and the dress of the official are similarly described in ritual terms. “The poverty office . . . is almost bare, nothing in it but a lot of wood chairs. It’s like they want to impress the poor that they don’t have leather top desks. . . . All our money goes to you,” Wolfe writes (p. 388). This is the “sanctuary” of the poverty program. It is poverty’s holy of holies.

Enter the Flak Catcher. He is the poverty program’s professional mourner. According to Wolfe, the Flak Catcher is ideal for his job because he is totally committed; he is a “lifer” (p. 389). The formal ritual begins with ritualized language on both sides which is given detailed attention by Wolfe. He captures the bureaucratic rhetoric of the welfare system. The Flak Catcher employs all of the minted phrases that go with his office. Wolfe quotes them verbatim. They are intoned with precision and exact frequency. Indeed, the dialogue between the ethnics and the Flak Catcher becomes like the antiphonal phrases of worship:
"Hey Brudda. How much you make?"
"Me? How much do I make?"
"Yeah, Brudda, you. How much money you make?"

The intonation of the ethnics has a chanting quality. The response by the flak catcher is that of a penitential worshipping. All the time, the rhythmicounding of the Samoans with their ritual-like canes accompanies the chanting, "Ba-ram-ba-ram-ba-ram."

Ritual is a prescribed behavioral response to the unknown. It is a way of being in relation with the unmanageable and uncontrollable. According to Philip French, in the ritual of mau-mauing, the ethnics "play on the fears and superstitions of the white bureaucrats" by being theatrically aggressive (though basically harmless) in dress, speech and gesture. The ethnics employ behavior they know will play on white fears, yet still be within prescribed boundaries. As Thomas R. Edwards has noted, through the ritual of mau-mauing, they are able to besiege the hallowed halls of the poverty office and, through their ritual, bluff and penetrate the counter-ritual of the Flak Catcher. In short, like democratic majority rule, the ritual of mau-mauing becomes a safe way of confrontation. In French's words: it provides "the mean-minded a victory over the well-intended."

One of the basic elements of ritual is the requirement of sacrifice. In ancient rituals, human sacrifice was often the highest form of sacrifice, considered most pleasing to the god or gods. In Twain's Cannibalism in the Cars, a daily offering was required. In Wolfe's work, the Flak Catcher is designated for sacrifice by the very nature of his position. "His job is to catch the flak for the No. 1 man," Wolfe writes (p. 389). His seemingly "casual" posture when he meets the angry mau-mauers, "straddling the seat and hooking his arms and his chin over the back of the chair," can also be seen as a position of sacrifice. His chin is on the block in the beheading position.

The Flak Catcher's answers make him even more vulnerable. On the one hand he declares he is the stand-in for the upper-level decision makers, and then he goes on to profess ignorance. He is weak and helpless, but he is on the firing line. The ethnics immediately detect his helplessness. One of the "bloods" declares, "We don't need you." Nevertheless, as Wolfe astutely implies, he is needed psychologically as the sacrificial victim. The mau-mauers proceed to intimidate him, to give him a tongue-lashing. When they are finished, Wolfe says, the Flak Catcher "could see eight kinds of Tiki sticks up side his head" (p. 393). In reality, of course, the Flak Catcher is not literally sacrificed—as in Twain's tale. He is, however, psychologically victimized in part of a twentieth century ritual which, Wolfe implies, is well-understood by all parties. "All they did was sacrifice one flak catcher," he notes (p. 394). Bureaucrats are expendable; he can easily be replaced.
Once the ghetto residents have the Flak Catcher offered to them as a sacrifice, they go away satisfied. As Peter Michelson has observed, one of the problems with the poverty program is that knowing bureaucrats are hired to sympathize with complaints and absorb hostility. Ventilation of hostility takes priority over achievement of the mau-mauers' true goals, and the welfare system remains relatively stable and unchanging. As Wolfe's satiric tale implies, all parties come off satisfied through this repeated ritual with one Flak Catcher being the cost.

Both Mark Twain and Tom Wolfe are sharp observers of American political and social hypocrisy. Twain could not tolerate pretense, and when he saw it, he exposed it. Foner has written that Twain was often "indignant over the widespread corruption in government." In Cannibalism in the Cars, Twain vividly portrays the helplessness of the individual in the face of the majority, and makes the reader question the use of democratic procedures in all human situations.

Wolfe, similarly, draws on the ritual of cannibalism to suggest the dehumanizing nature of U.S. "welfare" institutions. The rhythmic beating of the Tiki sticks, the blunt and threatening statements, all convey the savagery in the lives of the ethnics. At the same time Wolfe discerns the degrading job of the Flak Catcher. He is merely a scapegoat provided by the system to absorb the abuses of the ethnics. Both sides are dehumanized, as the ritual of cannibalism makes chillingly clear.

Mark Twain and Tom Wolfe have provided a service to American culture. Through their satires they have provided models through which criticism can be leveled at political institutions. By bringing ineffective policies and procedures to light, they have exercised the role of responsible citizenship. They have also raised sensitive questions about our forms of government. Twain reminds us that rule of the majority can neglect the welfare of the minority, and Wolfe hints that current social programs often create more problems than they solve. Indeed, he implies, that their effect is to provide short-term psychological release rather than longterm amelioration of human poverty. By looking at nineteenth and twentieth century social processes in ritualistic terms, Twain and Wolfe allow us to better perceive our sacred cows.

Notes

4 "Dandy Monocle," p. 404.