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Alyssa Alexander

PROFESSOR: How many of you think this text is racist?

I think to myself, *Who doesn't think this text is racist? I know, of course, a white instructor teaching a class on the Harlem Renaissance. She doesn't think it's racist. And what does this short story have to do with the Harlem Renaissance anyway? Thank God, she didn't ask me for the "black perspective."* The professor asks the question again, and I wait, hoping someone will just answer this woman's question.

Against my will, my hand touches the air.

PROFESSOR: You in the front.

ME: I under . . .

PROFESSOR: Say your name first.

ME: Alyssa . . . I understand she was a former slave, but no one really talked like that. We learn language from the people around us. She was a cook. Therefore, she was in the house around people who spoke proper English. I feel as though . . .

My rant continues. When I look back on this early exchange, it's obvious I didn't know much about Twain and his love for language. I knew neither Aunt Rachel nor her history. In many ways, I was like Misto C—, Aunt Rachel was simply a woman who sat respectfully below me. I did not see her. Learning that history later changed my response, and my own career as a teacher. My professor spent the remainder of class guiding us through the text in the hopes of introducing us to the "true" story of Aunt Rachel.

As the hundred-year commemoration of the life of Mr. Mark Twain approached, my professor, also the chair of the English department, asked Theater and English majors to perform selections of Mark Twain's work for the campus and the community. One of the pieces was, of course, "A True Story." My professor mentioned to the class, in what I thought at the time was a very PC gesture, "We're looking for actors, and would love to have an African American play the part of Aunt Rachel." I was one of six or seven students of color in the classroom, and I wasn't planning on taking the bait.

I thought, *Too bad, I'm black and not African American . . .* (All my life I've resented the assumptions beneath the term "African" American.)

FIG. 1 Mary Ann Cord. Courtesy Mark Twain Archive, Elmira College.

“There will be extra credit,” she said. *OK. I guess I will be African American today . . .*

After class, I went up to my professor and told her I would be willing to play the part. It surprised her a good deal. “Wait, what happened to ‘Twain’s a racist and Mary Ann Cord was his victim?’” she asked, with not a bit of irony.

“Well, if we’re going to do this. I want to make sure Aunt Rachel is black,” I said, thinking of my extra credit.

As I prepared to bring this story to life, I concentrated on memorizing the words first. At this stage, Aunt Rachel was still a caricature to me. I imagined her exactly as True Williams illustrated her. Once I knew the words by heart, I had to learn Aunt Rachel by heart. I went back to each line and considered how Aunt Rachel might have felt. I tried to gain an understanding of how and why each word was spoken. I needed to know what it looked like to be stunned by the dullness of a man whom, I assumed, might have known better.

"She turned her face over her shoulder toward me, and said, without even a smile in her voice . . . is you in 'arnest?"

I was required to imagine the life, which had grown inside of me, being pulled from my bosom by hateful men. "I grab' him clost up to my breas' so, an' I ris up an' says. 'You shan't take him away,' I says; 'I'll kill de man dat fetches him!"

I worked on the smile that would appear on my face as quickly as it would disappear as I remember the words "I gwyne run away, an' den I work an' buy yo' freedom." I had to capture the emotion that captured her when her youngest son "jist gazed, an' gazed" into her eyes after thirteen years. "De Lord God ob heaven be praise,' I got my own ag'in!"

During those weeks of preparation, Aunt Rachel told me her story. She introduced herself to me. "Aunt Rachel had gradually risen, while she warmed to her subject, and now she towered above us, black against the stars." For the first time, since the start of the semester, I looked up to her. I valued her. She wasn't some caricature. She was Mary Ann Cord. She had a story, a history, and a language. That story, history, and language in some way belonged to me as well. Misto C— and I were not the only ones who needed to be educated. Therefore, I needed to give her honor and share her story, repeated word for word as I heard it.

Gathered in that small auditorium, at a small Jesuit college, I nervously awaited my turn. Tom Sawyer, accompanied by David and Goliath, preached about the twelve disciples. Next, Pap Finn educated the audience on the government, "mulatters," and voting. As Pudd'nhead Wilson takes his seat, I enter stage left. I stopped quaking, paused, and there was a moment of silence. Without even a smile in my voice, I began.

. . . an' we loves dem chil'en jist de same as you loves you chil'en. Dey was black, but de Lord can't make no chil'en so black but what dey mother loves 'em an' wouldn't give 'em up, no, not for anything dat's in dis whole world.

. . . But dey got him—dey got him, de men did; but I took and tear de cloès mos' off of 'em, an' beat 'em over de head wid my chain; an' dey give it to me, too, but I didn't mine dat.

. . . an' dey ask me would I cook for dem. "Lord bless you," says I, "dat's what I's for."

. . . I up an' tole 'em bout my Henry, dey a-listen' to my troubles jist de same as if I was white folks.

. . . a spruce young nigger a-salin' down de room wid a yellor wench roun' de wais' . . . dey went to kin' o' balancin' aroun', fust on one leg an' den on t' 'other, an' smilin' at my big red turban, an' makin' fun.

... “Boy!” I says, “if you an’t my Henry.

... “Oh, no, Misto C—, I hain’t have no trouble. An’ no joy!”

We were crying: me, members of the audience, my classmates, I think even my professor. Although I had spent over a month with Mary Ann Cord, I could not believe the feeling her story excited that night. Every person in that small auditorium sat silently staring at me—as I stood there—black against the curtains, towering over them. Not only did they see Mary Ann Cord, behind the mask of Aunt Rachel, I felt like they saw me. I was not just the African American in the classroom with the “black perspective.” I had value. I belonged. I added something powerful to my college community that evening. I brought to life my history, my story, and my language. Aunt Rachel inspired me; I inspired them.

For this very reason, I chose “A True Story” to introduce my students to Mark Twain. The following spring, during my rotation of student teaching, Mary Ann Cord entered a classroom filled with a diverse group of high school juniors. The students did not hide their shock or laughter when they saw me in a red turban and tattered dress. (I was, perhaps, a little more sympathetic now to the position of a teacher working with Twain’s material!) “Miss A. what chu got on?” said a student. “You spose to be Aunt Jemima?” asked another. “No. I’m Aunt Rachel, I replied. But it seems you all have a lot to say about my style of dress. I’m going to write some of your thoughts on the board. Who else has an opinion they would like to share? Darren?”

DARREN: You look like a slave to me.

BRANDON: You was probably in the kitchen cus you’re light skin.

ME: Really? So what kind of life do you think I’ve had?

MYA: It probably wasn’t too bad. You ate good and didn’t get beat all the time because you wasn’t in the field.

MIKE: Fo’ real though, why you dressed like that?

I was pleased with all of their responses. They were exposing their failure to see beyond the surface the same way Misto C— had, the same way I had.

As I passed out copies of the short story, I responded to Mike. “When you look at me, you see a caricature. You assume that I have lived a comfortable life, but you don’t know my story.” *Has I had any trouble? Class, I’s gwyne tell you, den I leave it to you.*

In three to five paragraphs, students responded to “A True Story”. Mya wrote, “Misto C— was ignorant. We want to say he’s racist. We want to dislike him. He just didn’t really know Aunt Rachel. Nobody did until she told her

story. I think Mark Twain was trying to show us how ignorant people can be sometimes. Even though I want to be angry with Misto C—, I can't because I would have to be angry with me. We all can be ignorant, but we don't have to be if we're willing to listen to someone else's story. We also have to be willing to share our stories."

Mark Twain was an amazing storyteller who provoked laughter and thought. He knew the power of a good story to transform an audience. But Twain also knew that important stories were not always found in a book or even a college classroom. He knew that a story could hide behind a voice that never sighed or an eye that never was found without a laugh in it. He was willing to listen to voices that others ignored and eager to share stories; this, for me, is the power of his fiction. Not only did Twain experience enlightenment, he worked to enlighten others. Imagine the state of our world if everyone knew the value of a good story. As a young, novice teacher, my desire is to hear as many stories, and share as many stories, as I can. And my hope is to enlighten myself and my students. When I get discouraged, I'll remember: "It is noble to teach oneself, but still nobler to teach others—and less trouble."