

Nathan Laug

Mrs. Strebeck

English 101

2 February 2018

The Not So Secret Lives of Twain and Selzer

Most know Mark Twain and Richard Selzer from their works *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and *Letters to a Young Doctor* respectively, but what some may not know is that Twain and Selzer did not start out as authors. Twain started out as a riverboat pilot and explains his perspective of being in that industry throughout his essay *Two Views of The Mississippi*. Selzer on the other hand, began his career as a surgeon and explains his perspective on being a surgeon in the essay "Sarcophagus". While these careers have similarities that are few and far between, both authors convey their experiences through their attitude and use of imagery.

As authors, Twain and Selzer were given plenty of time to look back and reflect on their lives and how they changed. Twain loves the Mississippi River and expresses this when he compares the Mississippi River to a book, likening his love for the river to his feelings about being an author. With an attitude befitting that of a veteran of the rivers, Twain compares the Mississippi to a book that only the pilot can understand due to the various intricacies and nuances only able to be seen by the trained eye; hidden truths present in both. Selzer takes a different approach towards expressing the feelings he felt during his time as a surgeon. Selzer feels as though surgery is just a process that he has to complete with a beginning, middle, and end. At the beginning of the surgery, he counts 6 people in the room and then corrects himself and counts the patient on the table, considering the person he is about to operate on as another body, nothing more. Selzer gives off the impression that surgery is going to be quick and simple,

going so far as to relate teaching his students to a baptism when he states, “Now is he dipped; and I, his baptist” (566).

Throughout the course of these essays Twain’s attitude toward his career stayed the same while Selzer’s changed. As time passed Twain stated that much of the river lost its beauty. Everything that was once astonishing to him has revealed the underlying truth behind the mysteries. As Twain uncovers the truths of the river such as, “This sun means that we are going to have wind to-morrow; that floating log means that the river is rising...” he foreshadows eventually becoming an author (651). He finally understands the river, which in turn means he finally understands the “book”. He has become the master of the river, a master of his own stories. Twain is still doing what he loves but it has deepened over the years as he realizes that there is a meaning behind everything in the river just like there is a meaning behind everything he writes. Selzer, on the other hand, is a different case. Throughout the surgery, Selzer thought he was going to be able to help the patient, but about halfway through the surgery, Selzer realized the man was going to die regardless of his intervention. Once Selzer realizes he no longer has control over the situation he gives up, doubting himself and compares his tools to a miner’s; “The instrument does not exist that knows such deep red jugglery. Not all my clever picks, my rasp ... A miner's lamp, I think, to cast a brave glow” (567). Selzer begins to look at his tools and comes to the conclusion that they are only making the situation worse by cutting and not healing. He begins to panic and calls out frantically for more light before eventually giving up, cutting off the patient’s oxygen and allowing his to perish. On the outside, Selzer remains emotionless through this whole process, especially when delivering the news to the patient’s family. What they could not see, however, is that Selzer is fighting this internal battle over whether or not it was right to kill the patient. Selzer uses phrases like, “Tonight's knife is no

assassin, but the kind scythe of time,” to justify his actions by saying he was hastening the inevitable (568). Selzer’s main issue was not that the patient died but that he had no control over the outcome. Selzer has to make the decisions that no one else will as his team would not help him make the call leaving Selzer to do it himself. This event shows that, while Selzer is distraught internally, he justifies his actions essentially saying he had to do what was necessary, not empathetic towards the family.

Twain and Selzer both use imagery to explain what they saw during their careers. The imagery that Twain uses to describe the sunset on the river as he first saw it is very descriptive. Twain conveys his memories by describing river in the moment, capturing it with the expression, “A broad expanse of the river was turned to blood; in the middle distance the red hue brightened into gold...” (651). Twain describes the river to show his passion for being a riverboat pilot as he attempts to express the indescribable beauty of the river . Selzer uses imagery to amplify the horrors of being a surgeon. What was found in the patient’s stomach is described as, “ handfuls of clot, great black gelatinous masses that shimmy from the drapes to rest against our own bellies as though, having been evicted from one body, they must find another in which to dwell. Now and then we step back to let them slither to the floor” (565). After the patient had been sewn back up Selzer went to revisit the scene and compares the patient’s dead body to that of a white bullock. The patient’s dead body is nothing more than a dead animal to Selzer for which he cannot have any emotional attachment to or he will not be able to continue on as a surgeon so Selzer has to close the door and forget this ever happened, essentially closing the lid on the sarcophagus.

Two individuals from different backgrounds eventually arriving at the same point; that is what Mark Twain and Richard Selzer are. Both fantastic authors in their own rights, they use the

same devices to reflect upon their pasts. Looking back at it all, both men uncovered the underlying truth to their careers yet it shaped them in two very distinct ways. For Twain, the beauty that was the Mississippi took on new meaning while Selzer's past became one of internal strife and callous indifference.