

Mark Twain's "Votes for Women":
Empowerment and Advocacy in the Early 20th Century

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On January 20, 1901, Samuel Langhorne Clemens, an American author, and writer, also known as Mark Twain, delivered his speech, “Votes for Women”, at an annual meeting of the Hebrew Technical School for Girls. The institution was an appropriate and perfect location for the speech, given the school focused on training its students to be independent women who can make their own living apart from a supporting spouse (Annual Report). Among those who heard his speech were the young women from the school (Kraustins). The average age of these students was fifteen years, and they had parents born in countries such as Russia, Roumania, Germany, Hungary, Austria, America, and other countries. Others in the audience were Nathaniel Myers (President of Hebrew Technical), and Adolph Lewisohn (First Vice-President), Joseph Hershheim (Second Vice-President), Trustees Louis A. Ansbacher, Annie W. Calman, and Honorary Trustee Minnie D. Louis (Annual Report). The speech was about the impact women could make in society if the ballot was in their hands. In support of Women's Suffrages, Twain believed and predicted women would be able to vote and become a part of creating laws within twenty-five years of his speech. Twain’s reason for saying what he said was because he regretted not doing certain right things in the past when the opportunity was given. With that, Twain boldly made his statement on Women’s contribution in the town if given the right to vote. The Women’s Rights Movement was ongoing when Twain delivered his speech in 1901(The Women’s Rights Movement).

Twain made many points in his speech that stood out like bold letters. These points were very important because they displayed Twain’s belief in women, and his words also empowered women. He remarked in his speech, “When a person with his millions gives a hundred thousand dollars it makes a great noise in the world, but he does not miss it; it's the widow's mite that makes no noise but does the best work” (Mark Twain, 1901 Votes for Women). In those days

women are viewed as second class. Women did not have many rights, let alone the right to vote. Many in society saw their contribution as minimal or no worth at all. Their hard work and efforts were compared and valued to a widow's mite. A mite was a Jewish coin used during the Bible's New Testament time and was worth 1/64 of a denarius, which is equivalent to 1/8 of a penny today (Taylor). When the rich people gave, everyone noticed it and praise them. In the same way, men were seen as rich people. Whatever they accomplished, people acknowledged and commended them. When women contributed to the good of humanity, in contrast, only a few people took notice of it, and no recognitions were given. However, Twain saw something different and stated that though women's efforts did not make a public headline, it was the best work (Twain). He believed in women and their roles.

Another important statement Twain made was regarding his mother. He stated, "I have always believed, long before my mother died, that, with her gray hairs and admirable intellect, perhaps she knew as much as I did. Perhaps she knew as much about voting as I" (Twain). Twain had always known his mother knew just as much about the ballot as he did. Because of the time they lived in, perhaps his mother could not speak her mind and decided to quietly sit back allowed the men to take charge of the election. In the same way, Twain believed many women are similar his mother. They are full of intellect and can transform the town if only the right to vote were granted.

Twain made another significant statement when he mentioned, "I should like to see the time come when women shall help to make the laws. I should like to see that whiplash, the ballot, in the hands of women" (Twain). It is interesting to note here that Twain used the word "whiplash" with the word "ballot". For certain, Twain knew voting is the movable tool for making change. Voting could change the outcome of the election and fix the corruption and

injustice issues in their days. Though society may be heading in the wrong direction, new leaders emerging could alter and point the town in the correct direction. Twain believed if women could vote, they could select someone who could create laws that would govern the land and the people the correct way. The state of the town would be different.

Some may ponder, “what were some of Twain’s initial reasons for giving his speech in the first place?” The first clear cut evidence from Twain’s speech that could help one to see why the message was given can be seen in the following statement, “If all the women in this town had a vote today, they would elect a mayor at the next election, and they would rise in their might and change the awful state of things now existing here” (Twain). The city’s government for the Hebrew Technical School for Girls was considered “a shame” in Twain’s eyes (Twain). It was one bad decision after another. The state of the city was corrupted because of the current leaders. Twain believed that women’s role in the ballot could alter the town’s current condition. If given the right to vote, women could elect someone during the next election to clean up the mess and straighten things out. Another evidence can be seen when Twain expressed, “As for this city’s government, I don’t want to say much, except that it is a shame – a shame” (Twain). This evidence further showed the trouble the town was in. Something needed to be done before the hole was too deep to climb out of it.

The two quotes from the previous paragraph further displayed how life was in the United States at the time the speech was given. There were perhaps many corrupt leaders throughout the country. Leaders created laws accordingly to their agenda and personal gain. People were treated very unfairly. There were good changes women throughout the nation were treated as second- and third-class citizens. For a natural-born American like Twain to boldly put out clear-cut statements the way he did in the speech exhibited the true state of the country. Twain spoke of

America the way how it truly was. He presented the true color behind the mask American people wore.

There were many events that took place before Twain made his speech. Three years before Twain made his speech on “Vote for Women”, U.S President McKinley send battleship Maine to Havana as a peace-keeping measure (Chapter 19 Slide Show). However, on February 15, 1898, the Maine ship exploded while docked in Havana, killing 353 Americans. Shortly after this tragic event, Congress declared war on Spain. By June 15, 1898, the Anti-imperialist league was formed to fight the U.S annexation of the Philippines, and among the members was Mark Twain (Yawp). In that same year, the yellow fever broke out, sidelining a little more than three-quarters of the Army by August of 1898 (Gotschlich). More battles occurred in 1899 as fights broke out between the American forces and the Filipinos. The ensuing Philippine and American war lasted three years and resulted in four-thousand American death and twenty-thousands Filipino death (Slide show). By 1901, the same year Twain made his speech, Theodore Roosevelt became President of the United States of America. After Twain delivered his speech in 1901, it would be almost another two decades before Congress ratified the 19th Amendments, which guarantees all American women the right to vote (19th Amendment).

Since Twain addressed the members of the Hebrew Technical School for Girls at their Annual meeting regarding the issue of female suffrage, there was little to no objection from the audience. Those present at the meeting were in support of the school and its goal. There may have been those outside of the audience who opposed the idea of women’s suffrage. One such person was Josephine Jewell Dodge who founded and became president of the National Association Opposed to Woman Suffrage (Josephine). Dodge spoke against suffrage and remarked, “The life of the average woman is not so ordered as to give her first-hand knowledge

of those things which are the essentials of sound government.... She is worthily employed in other departments of life, and the vote will not help her fulfill her obligations therein” (Women’s Suffrage). Though Dodge did not oppose Twain's speech directly, she spoke against suffrage in those days.

A question I have for Mark Twain that has been left unanswered by his speech would be this, “Why did the speech only focus on women suffrage and not the issues of equality among the sexes, along with racial equality?”. Trying to fix all of the United States’ equality issues was nearly impossible at that point. In a way, Twain knew that if women could get involved in the ballot, the future would look brighter and better. If women become makers and enforcers of laws in the country, the state of the nation would change (Mark Twain at Hebrew Tech). Just as someone wrote about what women can accomplish if the ballot were given to them, “They would their strength to vote down unworthy candidates and restore the morals on which states are build” (Tech). With that, Twain's speech focused on encouraging and empowering women, rather than addressing all of the other equality problems.

Mark Twain was known for being an author and writer of American’s most famous novels such as "The Adventures of Tom Sawyer" and "The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn" (America’s Story). Though there may not be many records of Twain being an advocate of women’s rights, his speech demonstrated he did support women’s suffrages in some ways. He displayed this in his speech during the annual meeting of the Hebrew Technical School for Girls. Though Twain never witness the ratification of the 19th Amendment, the statement he made that day left an unquenchable flame in the hearts of the audience. It would be another nineteen years before women could vote. The 19th Amendment was first proposed to Congress in 1878 and ratified by 1920. It took many sacrifices and relentless efforts throughout the forty-two years to

put voting rights into law. Twain's speech played its part in keeping the flame alive in the hearts of the people when all hope seemed lost.

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