

”Old Times on the Mississippi” : Pilot Wiley and His Story (In Honour of Professor Masaaki Yoshino On the Occasion of His Retirement)

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“Old Times on the Mississippi”: Pilot Wiley and His Story

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Mark Twain gives prominent roles both to Bixby and to Brown in “Old Times on the Mississippi.” The former is Sam’s first chief and a skilled veteran pilot from whom he receives a large part of his training for a licensed pilot. The latter is a tyrannical and terribly mean pilot and Sam’s attack on him leads to Henry’s death in the *Pennsylvania* explosion. Compared with these two pilots, Wiley has not gained as much attention as he deserves, because it seems he plays only a small role without exerting an active influence on Sam. He is portrayed as an eccentric man having “a most irreverent independence” in the presence of persons in authority. I evaluate Wiley’s story in the light of the real-life pilot, Strother Wiley on whom fictional Wiley is modeled.

In order to write a humorous initiation story, Twain modifies reality, making Bixby three years older and portraying Sam as a naive inexperienced boy. In doing so, he focuses on the relationship between master and cub in a rather simplified way, and at the same time he leaves out some other important phases in the life on the river. One of them is the real condition of the trade of steamboating, which was conducted solely for profit “without conscience, responsibility, or control.” During the flush times of the commerce, Pilots’ Association was established. Strother Wiley became the first president of the organization and contributed to the improvement of pilots’ working conditions. Taking this fact into consideration, we find a new meaning in one of Wiley’s episodes in which he pilots the boat at an extremely slow speed whistling the same tune all the way to force the captain to raise his wages. This humorous story, which Twain writes to accentuate Wiley’s eccentricity, turns out to have another meaning: a fight for higher wages by means of slow down strike. Twain just depicts humorous interaction between pilot and captain

without the least intention of presenting the pilots’ struggle against the corrupted commerce. But when we read Pilot Wiley’s anecdote with real-life Strother Wiley in mind, we detect a hint of the economic reality in which all pilots were involved.