

Patience Worth (Pearl Curran)

'Patience Worth' was the putative author of novels, poems and other writings channeled by Pearl Curran (1883-1937) from 1913 to her death, first through the use of a Ouija board, then by clairvoyant and clairaudient dictation. The material consisted of seven full length novels along with short stories, plays, thousands of poems, and a large number of epigrams and aphorisms. Much of the output was characterized by a pithy, idiosyncratic and archaic language, but was also considered to be of exceptional literary quality. Patience Worth was called a wit, a poet, a dramatist, and a philosopher; some even compared her to Shakespeare, Chaucer, Shelley, and Spenser. Controversy continues as to whether she really was the spirit of a British-born American who lived in the seventeenth century, as she described herself, or merely a secondary personality formed by Curran's subconscious.



Pearl Curran's Early Life

Pearl Lenore Pollard was born in Mound City, Illinois of English, Welsh, and Irish decent. During her infancy her family moved to Ft Worth, Texas, where her father was employed by a railroad company; she lived for a year with a grandmother in St Louis, Missouri before returning to Ft Worth at about age four. She was confirmed in the Episcopal Church, although she later recalled that her parents did not attend church. She took piano lessons and recorded she had a nervous breakdown of some kind at age thirteen as a result of 'too much piano, elocution, Delsarte, school, and entertainments', and was sent to St. Ignatius's Academy, a Catholic institution, for rest.^[1]

Soon afterwards the family moved to St Louis and lived with her grandmother and aunt. Pearl's formal education ended with elementary school. Sometime during her teens, she was sent to Chicago, Illinois to study voice and while there played the piano at her uncle's Spiritualist church for a short time. However, she later stated that she was never a Spiritualist and considered herself an Episcopalian. She worked in clerical positions in Chicago and also sold music. Between ages 18 and 24, she taught voice and piano in Bismarck, Missouri, returning to Chicago each winter for additional lessons. In 1907, at age 24, she married John H Curran, a successful businessman twelve years her senior. They settled in St Louis in an upper-class neighborhood.

Patience Worth

In July 1912, Curran began experimenting with a Ouija board, together with her mother and a friend named Emily Grant Hutchings, who said she had made contact with a deceased relative by such means at a neighbor's house. The activity was mainly a way of occupying their time while their husbands played pinocle, and the sessions were interrupted after two months by the death of Curran's father. When they resumed, messages were given during Ouija sessions purporting to come from Curran's father, Hutchings's mother and other deceased persons, but the statements were of such banal and unconvincing character that Curran was inclined to abandon the game. However, Hutchings was more enthusiastic and encouraged Curran to continue, the pair sitting at the board as Curran's mother recorded the statements.

In a session on July 8, 1913, a year after they first began, the board seemed more alive than usual. 'Many moons ago I lived,' the communication began. 'Again I come, Patience Worth my name.'^[2] The three women pressed for more information, but Patience did not seem to want to talk about herself. 'About me, thou wouldst know much,' Patience told them. 'Yesterday is dead. Let thy mind rest as to the past.'^[3] It was apparent that Patience wanted to teach, not talk about herself. She did say, however, that she was born in England during the seventeenth century and migrated to America, where she was killed by American Indians. The years 1649 and 1694 were given through the board, possibly the years of her birth and death, but there was some confusion concerning these numbers.

When Pollard jokingly commented about Patience's reluctance to talk about herself, Patience responded: 'Wilt thou but stay thy tung! On rock-ribbed shores beat wisdom's waves. Why speak for me? My tung was loosed when thine was yet to be.'^[4] And when Pollard complained that Patience was unfriendly, Patience replied: 'Too much sweet may spoil the shortbread.'^[5]

At a later sitting, Pollard commented that the world is crying for proofs of immortality, to which Patience responded:

To prove a fact, needst thou a book of words, when e'en the sparrow's chirp telleth thee more? A tale unfolded by the

Bishop's drudge may hold the meat for thousands, while dust and web are strong on his Eminence. The road to higher plains leadeth not along the steeple. Drop ye a coin and expect the gods to smile. Chant ye a creed and wordy prayer, reeking with juice squeezed from thy smug fat store of self-love, expecting favor from the God who but enjoys the show...^[6]

Until early 1914 it was assumed that both Curran and Hutchings had to be present for Patience to communicate, but in March of that year it was discovered that Curran's was the active influence, and Hutchings' participation became that of an observer. Unlike many mediums, Curran did not go into a trance state and could converse normally, as her hands moved the pointer on the board to letters while another person recorded the messages. Eventually Curran dispensed with the board altogether, finding she could receive communications through a combination of clairvoyance and clairaudience, either typing the words as she received them or dictating the words to another person as she saw or heard them.

Published Writings

Casper Yost, Sunday editor of the *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, heard about Patience Worth and attended a session in October 1914. He became fascinated by the phenomenon, and began attending regular sessions, taking notes and producing a lengthy feature article entitled 'The Mystery of Patience Worth' for the February 7, 1915 edition of the *Globe-Democrat*, the first of a series of five weekly articles about Patience.

In the October 1, 1915 issue of *Reedy's Mirror*, a highly-regarded literary journal, William Marion Reedy told the world of his 'flirtation' with Patience Worth. He explained that he had had many sittings with Curran and that he had absolutely no doubt as to the integrity of the parties involved. He further noted that Curran did not always understand his questions or the responses by Patience Worth. He called the spiritual content of Patience's poetry 'an archaic Wordsworthianism, with a somewhat of Emersonism'. He described Patience as piquant in the extreme, witty and aphoristic in a homely way, and saucy but never rude.

She will not answer personal questions about herself or tell you the usual stock things of so many spirit communications about lost jack-knives in the distant past, or when your wealthy grandmother is going to die... None of that stuff goes with Patience... She is ready with repartee and she says things that probe the character of her questioners.^[7]

But Reedy rejected the idea that Patience Worth was a spirit, finding it impossible to believe that the dead could talk to the living. He preferred the 'secondary personality' theory, which held that some alter ego in Curran's subconscious was bringing through the words, perhaps having absorbed the information from visits to the library during her youth – although Reedy conceded this would be no less mysterious. Patience herself lashed out at the suggestion that she was a secondary personality of Pearl Curran, saying 'She be but she and I be me.'^[8]

Curran's limited education and travel appeared inconsistent with theories of conscious fraud or subconscious memories. English scholars struggled with some of the archaic Anglo-Saxon language. In one of her novels, Patience dictated, 'I wot he fetcheth in daub-smear'd smock.' Even in the early 1900s, the word 'fetch' was rarely used, but when used it meant to 'go and get' someone or something. Patience used it as synonymous with 'came' or 'cometh,' which philologists confirmed as the word's original meaning.^[9]

When a philologist asked Patience how and why she used the language of so many different periods, she responded: 'I do plod a twist of a path and it hath run from then till now.' When it was pointed out to her that her poetry resembled that of some fairly recent poets, she answered, 'There be aneath the every stone a hidden voice. I but loose the stone and lo, the voice!'^[10]

WT Allison, professor of English literature at the University of Manitoba, observed that Patience Worth dictated words found only in Milton's time, some of which had to be researched in dialectic dictionaries and old books to discover their meanings. Allison, who closely studied Curran, reported that in one evening fifteen poems were produced in an hour and fifteen minutes, an average of five minutes for each poem. He wrote:

All were poured out with a speed that Tennyson or Browning could never have hoped to equal, and some of the 15 lyrics are so good that either of those great poets might be proud to have written them.^[11]

The Patience Worth personality exhibited remarkable feats of memory and organization. In a test conceived by the psychological researcher Walter Franklin Prince, Curran dictated a poem from Patience while at the same time she wrote a letter to a friend. In another test, she dictated four different stories, going from one to the other, the breaks between the

stories fitting so closely that one character in one story seemed to reply to the character in another story.

Patience would reply promptly to any question put to her. When asked if the spirits of our friends are around us, Patience responded, 'Yea, yea, the Here lappeth thy lands even as the young waves lap the shore.' Should efforts be made to communicate? 'It shall be that the heavens shall give up unto the earth that that shall ope their blinded eyes more, more, more. Tis well; thou shouldst call.' Asked if there is a concerted movement on her plane to communicate with earth, Patience responded, 'Ne'er, ne'er, shalt heaven ope to earth. The seed ahead be but seed.'^[12]

While much of Patience's speech was archaic, some of her communications were also expressed in modern English. She has shown from the beginning an ability to write or to speak in such terms as she chooses,' Prince explained, pointing out that it became less archaic as time went on.

But if she chooses a dialect, let me call it, for a particular work, that dialect is consistently maintained to the end, however long the work may be, and no matter what form of speech her purpose or her mood suggests it is poured out with unvarying ease and sureness. Often she has dictated parts of two books of widely different dialects and conversed freely in a third in a single hour, without the slightest confusion. Her knowledge of English of all times and the extent of her vocabulary is equally amazing. Without burdening her works with wholly obsolete words she often gives to common words meanings that reach back into Saxon times and were obsolete in such senses long before the seventeenth century.^[13]

Publications and Critical Reception

Patience's most celebrated work, *The Sorry Tale*, a 644-page, 325,000 word novel about the last days of Jesus, was published in June 1917, the author listed as Patience Worth, not Pearl Curran. According to the editor Casper Yost, who was present when much of the book was dictated, the story was begun without any previous knowledge on the part of Curran of the time and conditions of Palestine beyond what is revealed in the New Testament. Yet it goes far beyond what might be gleaned from the New Testament. 'In one evening, 5,000 words were dictated, covering the account of the crucifixion,' Yost reported.^[14]

In a review of the book, *The National* wondered how the story-teller could be so familiar with the scents, sounds, colors and other characteristics of Oriental market places and wildernesses, of Roman palaces, and halls of justice. A reviewer for the *New York Globe* commented that the book exceeded *Ben Hur* and *Quo Vadis* as 'a quaint realistic narrative'. The *Columbus (Ohio) Dispatch* opined that no other book gives one so clear a view of customs, manners, and character of the peoples of the time and place.

Professor Roland Greene Usher, dean of history at Washington University, called *The Sorry Tale* 'the greatest story of Christ penned since the Gospels were finished'. He pointed out that the book was written in seventeenth-century English with no anachronisms.^[15]

Similar praise greeted Patience Worth's 1918 book, *Hope Trueblood*. The *Los Angeles Times* called it a 'masterpiece'. The *Chicago Mail* called the author a 'master word builder' and wondered at 'the sheer beauty of the story's thought and diction'. The *New York Tribune* referred to it as 'a work approximating absolute genius'. The British periodical *Lady's Pictorial* said that the book 'will stand as a landmark of fiction by a new writer, who will take a prominent place among great writers.'^[16]

Investigations and Theories

Prince mentioned that both 'Patience' and 'Worth' were fairly common names in seventeenth century England and also in early Massachusetts.

No unambiguous record has ever been traced of a real Patience Worth. No records could be found of a Patience Worth from seventeenth century England. Incomplete census records revealed at least two women named Patience Worth living in New England during the seventeenth century, however there was no way to confirm that Curran's Patience Worth was one of them.

The name Patience Worth did turn up as a minor character, that of a maid, in a 1900 novel, *To Have and to Hold*, by Mary Johnston, and, although Pearl Curran declared that she had never heard of the book, it was theorized that she might have read the book and forgot about it, while storing the name away in her subconscious. However, as Prince and other researchers pointed out, even if Curran's 'secondary personality' adopted the name from the novel, this did not explain

how all the archaic speech, intelligence, creativity, wisdom, wit, and knowledge got into her subconscious or how the subconscious could produce it so easily.

One Spiritualist theory holds that Patience Worth was a pseudonym, or pen name, adopted by a 'group soul' – a number of advanced souls in the spirit world communicating as one. Such a group soul had been earlier reported with other mediums, including William Stainton Moses, a nineteenth century Anglican priest and medium.

Allegations were made that Curran was a clever trickster. EH Garnett, a Chicago lawyer, responded by saying he had known her for years and felt certain that she was not a 'falsifier,' even though he could offer no reasonable explanation as to her ability.

I have on a number of occasions seen her produce, orally and without a moment's hesitation, from twenty to thirty poems on diverse, abstract and concrete subjects given to her by audiences. There is, so far as I know, no other person in the world who can, under such circumstances, even remotely approach this work, either in spontaneity, beauty, perfection of form or in content.^[17]

Similar testimonials were given by others, such as the prominent author and publisher Henry Holt:

It has of course been suggested that [Pear Curran] plays the Patience Worth trick for the sake of notoriety, but how utterly un-supposable it is that a woman capable of composing work of which some specimens are declared by competent critics to be very close to masterpieces, should, loving notoriety, try to throw upon another intelligence the credit of her work, and smother it under a language which nobody uses, and that it requires some effort to understand.^[18]

William E Slaght, professor of psychology at Cornell College, discounted the subconscious theory, stating,

The subconscious, as we know it, contains nothing that has not come in through the channels of the consciousness. A fair-minded investigation will not allow me to accept any adequate basis in Mrs. Curran's experiences for all the wide variety of facts presented in Patience's literature.

Slaght preferred to think that Curran was able to tap into the 'springs of some cosmic consciousness'.^[19]

Walter Prince studied Curran closely for some ten months, and in 1927 published a detailed 509-page analysis of the Patience Worth phenomenon. He concluded:

Either our concept of what we call the subconscious must be radically altered, so as to include potencies of which we hitherto have had no knowledge, or else some cause operating through but not originating in the subconsciousness of Mrs. Curran must be acknowledged.^[20]

Before his investigation of Pearl Curran, Prince was involved in the famous Doris Fischer case, one of the first cases of multiple personality to be the subject of scientific study. His report on the case was 1,332 pages long and made no definitive decision in favor either of multiple personalities or spirit possession. Prince argued that science's definition 'subliminal self' was too restricted, 'a mere cloak for our ignorance whenever we are confronted by the inexplicable events with which we have to attempt to grapple'.^[21]

The Philosophy of Patience Worth

On death: 'Cheap pence paid for eternity and yet man whines.'^[22]

On laughter: 'Me thinks that of all the gifts from Thy prolific hand, laughter, next to love, is dearest.'^[23]

On life: 'Life is a gaysome trickster. Yea, life poureth about the atoms o' man wines of cunning, and equally is he filled up of Him. Thereby is man given freely and his lighting unto life leaveth him for his choosing. Aye, and the giving be wry-fallen atimes, for flesh to tarry long and dance with life, fearing the greater thing athin it.'^[24]

On philosophy: 'Philosophy is a bony nag and her gait is woeful. He who rides must spur her well with his ain imagination.'^[25]

On learning: 'Wisdom scratcheth the itch of the lout, while learning searcheth for the flea.'^[26]

On fear: 'The undergarment of every armor. Man moutheth over words, and hangeth his wisdom with garments of words.'

Man knoweth certainties which even God doubteth.^{1[27]}

On the press: ‘The gab wench of the day!’^{2[28]}

On the doctors of her day: ‘A sorry lot, eh? Aye, and they did for to seek of root and herb; – aye, and play ’pon the wit, or the lackin’ o’ it!’^{3[29]}

On the women of her day: ‘Chattels; beasties, verily. Ye should have seen me mither’s thumb – flat with the twistin’ o’ flax, and me in buskins, alookin’ at the castle, and dreaming dreams!’^{4[30]}

On God: ‘If I were with one word to swing HIM, that word would shatter into less than the atoms of the mists that cling the mountain tops. If I should speak HIM in a song, the song would slay me! And going forth, man would become deaf when he listed. If I should announce HIM with a quill and fluid, lo, the script would be nothing less than Eternity to hold the word I would write.’^{5[31]}

On scientific fundamentalism: ‘Man’s law is precision, God’s is chaotic. Man’s wisdom is offensive to God, therefore He shows his displeasure in complications. To man the complications are chaos, thereby is man deceived. To God, man’s precision is the fretfulness of a babe, aye, and man at his willful deceiving is undone. Then to God, man is precisely chaotic; to man, God is the disruption of precision.’^{6[32]}

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References

Footnotes

- 1.^ Prince, 12
- 2.^ Yost, 2
- 3.^ Yost, 11
- 4.^ Prince, 35
- 5.^ Prince, 39
- 6.^ Prince, 43
- 7.^ Litvag, 56-59
- 8.^ Litvag, 61
- 9.^ Prince, 364
- 10.^ Yost, 39
- 11.^ Prince, 56
- 12.^ Prince, 296-297
- 13.^ Prince, 376-377
- 14.^ Worth, Preface)
- 15.^ Prince, 172
- 16.^ Prince, 72-74
- 17.^ Prince, 30
- 18.^ Prince, 65)
- 19.^ Prince, 69)
- 20.^ Prince, 509
- 21.^ Prince, 508)

- 22.^ Prince, 200
- 23.^ Prince, 201
- 24.^ Prince, 221
- 25.^ Prince, 198
- 26.^ Prince, 201
- 27.^ Prince, 202
- 28.^ Prince, 210
- 29.^ Prince, 210
- 30.^ Prince, 212
- 31.^ Prince, 169
- 32.^ Prince, 185)