

Creator and Fallen Angel: The Christian Atheism of Mark Twain

Diane M. Plotkin, Adjunct Professor, Brookhaven College and University of North Texas

I have been on the verge of being an angel all my life, but it's never happened yet.

-----Mark Twain (*Wit and Wisdom*)

The writings of Mark Twain range from humor to heresy. They are witty, wise, sardonic and satirical. Influenced by Darwin and Freud, he questions the role of man-and God-in the greater universe. Analyzing the structural problem of the writings of his later years, Fussell notes that these in these works, particularly in *The Mysterious Stranger*, Twain's

...philosophic position... can be described as a grotesque medley of fatalism, misanthropy and cynicism... which reflect the post Darwinian pessimism of the late nineteenth century... They include 'the use of an inverted "Great Chain of Being" concept... attacks on the "Moral Sense"... and contempt for human reason and dignity....'¹

The darker tone of his later works is also influenced by his religious beliefs-or lack thereof, as well as by several adversities in his life. First was the loss of his fortune. Samuel Clemens had invested in the Paine Compositor Manufacturing Company, a typesetting company, which was dissolved on December 22, 1894. As a result it is estimated that his financial losses were between \$170,000 and \$300,000, a great deal of money at the time.² In an effort to recoup some of his losses, he went on a lecture tour of Europe. While he was away, his favorite daughter Susy, aged twenty-four, succumbed to spinal meningitis (ibid, 579). Regarding her death, "He recalled the parting on the on the [train] platform of July [1895], with Susy waving in the glare of the electric lights." As he wrote to a friend:

'One year, one month & (*sic*) one week later [my wife] Livy and [younger daughter] Clara had completed the circuit of the globe, arriving at Elmira at the same at the same hour in the evening, by the same train & *in the same car (sic)* - & Susy was there to meet them-lying white and fair in her coffin in the house she was born in... Will healing ever come, or life have value again? And shall we see Susy? Without doubt! Without *shadow* of doubt, if it can furnish opportunity to break our hearts again.'³

Powers continues, "These corrosive lamentations in letters and notebooks began a literature of grief for Susy that would spill from Samuel Clemens for the rest of his life." (ibid). The third tragedy of these later years was the death of his beloved wife. Olivia died shortly after 9 P.M. on Sunday, June 5, 1904 after a final illness that had lasted twenty-two months. She was fifty-seven. Regarding her death, Clemens wrote to a friend, "...I am tired and old; I wish I were with Livy" (ibid). Fourth was the death of his daughter Jean, aged twenty-nine. On December 24, 1909, at 11:00 o'clock in the morning, she drowned in the bathtub during an epileptic seizure. Following her death Twain wrote, "Would I bring her back to life if I could do it? I would not... In her loss I am almost bankrupt, and my life is bitterness, but I am content; for she has been enriched with the most precious of all gifts.... death (ibid).

¹ Edwin S. Fussell, "The Structural Problem of *The Mysterious Stranger*," in John S. Tuckey, *Mark Twain's The Mysterious Stranger and the Critics*, (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Pub, 1968), 76.

² Ron Powers, *Mark Twain, A Life*, (New York: Free press, 2005), 561. Hereafter cited by page number.

³ Letter to William Dean Howells, September 24, 1897, quoted in Powers, 579)

The combination of these events with Clemens's inner conflicts regarding religion and man's relationship to God are evident in many his works. A few of the topics include the following:

The Meaning of Suffering

Twain's feelings of despondency, which are evident in these later works, are expressed through the words of his characters. For this reason, although his writings still tended to be humorous, the tone of many of them, especially those he wrote later in his life, was often rather dark. Several, despite the humor, were downright heretical. For this reason several were published posthumously, and others were never completed. In "Little Bessie" written in 1909 but unpublished until after his death, Twain portrays Bessie as a thoughtful three-year-old child who attempts to make sense of the reasons for man's miseries.⁴ In doing so she questions her mother's belief in God's seeming wisdom and mercy. In response to her first question, "What is it all for?" her mother answers with unwavering faith that out of His love for us God sends all of our misfortunes for a higher purpose, stating, "the Lord [in His wisdom and mercy] sends [all of man's afflictions] to discipline us and make us better" (3). Wondering why a loving God would inflict such pain and suffering upon the innocent, Bessie goes on to question His reasons. One example is a young child who died of typhus. When her exasperated mother can think of no reason for the child's death, she surmises that "...it was to discipline his parents." Bessie, however, asks, "Why should *his* (sic) life be taken for their sake, when he wasn't doing anything?"⁵ Other examples include a roof that fell in on a stranger who was trying to save an old woman from a fire; a baby into whom a drunken man stuck a pitchfork; creatures (germs) that cause diseases and plagues; lightening that struck a church, causing it to burn down, as well as a hog "that wasn't doing anything." Bessie asks, "Was it to discipline the church?" Was it to discipline the hog...?" And each time, although there seems to be no sensible answer, her mother responds that God alone knows the reason, telling her daughter, "Don't ask me why, because I don't know. I only know it was to discipline some one (*sic*), or be a judgment upon somebody, or to show his power." Bessie argues that her friend Mr. Hollister told her, "He hasn't invented anything, but got His Bible and His Flood and His morals and all His ideas from earlier gods, and they got them from still earlier gods (*ibid*, 4-5)).

The Reason for and Finality of Death

The Wit and Wisdom of Mark Twain, first published in 1999, is a short collection of Twain's quips and entries in what he called his "Notebook."⁶ Several of these indicate the fact that he considers death a friend, a final relief from the sufferings of life. For example in a speech entitled "On Adam" he told his audience, "Death, the refuge, the solace, the best and kindest and most prized friend and benefactor of the erring, the forsaken, the old, and weary, and broken of heart, whose burdens be heavy upon them, and who would lie down and be at rest" (31). In *Following the Equator* he had written, "Pity is for the living, envy is for the dead" (50). He believed that death was final; there was no immortality, writing in his Notebook, "One of the

⁴ Mark Twain, "Little Bessie," in *The Devil's Racetrack: Mark Twain's Great Writings*, Edited by John S. Tuckey, (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of CA press, 1980), 3 – 13.

⁵ Twain seems to be expressing his grief for Susy's death in Bessie's question.

⁶ *The Wit and Wisdom of Mark Twain: A Book of Quotations*, Edited by Paul Negri, (Mineola, NY: Dover Pub, 1999). Hereafter cited by original source, *Wit and Wisdom*, and page number in text.

proofs of the immortality of the soul is that myriads have believed in it. They have also believed that the world was flat” (27).

Twain wrote a short story in 1903 entitled “The Five Boons of Life”⁷ a “good fairy” offers a youth his choice of one of the following five gifts: “Fame, Love, Riches, Pleasure, [and] Death” (98). The youth chooses each in turn, only to come to disillusionment and grief each time, as he realizes that “They are not gifts, but merely lendings.” At long last, weary and forlorn, he asks her for the gift of death, as he realizes that only death will bring him the relief from the burdens of the world that he longs for. Unfortunately, however, the fairy has granted this “gift” to a child, leaving the former youth only the “wanton insult of Old Age” (ibid 100).

Immaculate Conception

According to Clemens, the concepts of the Immaculate Conception and the Virgin Mary are far from unique. For example, he notes that the Hindu god Krishna was considered to have been conceived by Immaculate Conception, as was the Buddhist god Gautama. Some of the Greek gods were thought to have sired “mongrels half human and half divine. The Romans borrowed the idea from the Greeks, and the Christians learned it from the Romans”⁸ Little Bessie tells her mother that Mr. Hollister told her that [Mary] can’t be a Virgin as she had five children after “she had the One that was begotten by absent treatment and didn’t break anything.... She continues, ”if the Virgin lived in Chicago now, and got in the family way and explained to the newspaper fellows that God was the Correspondent, she couldn’t get two in ten of them to believe it (Tuckey 1980, 12). As Twain concludes in “Reflections on Religion”:

The Immaculate Conception rests wholly upon the testimony of a single witness—a witness whose very existence has nothing to rest upon but the assertion of the young peasant wife whose husband needed to be pacified....Mary’s testimony satisfied him but that is because he lived in Nazareth instead of New York.” (Neider 35)

Religion and Christianity

Clemens spoke of himself as a “positive atheist,” i.e. one who studies religion as an unbeliever, although his critics note that “there are more biblical references in [Twain’s] collected works than references to any other literary work or figure”⁹ Sloan notes that as an adult, Clemens discarded the concepts of heaven and hell and immortality. According to the writings of Thomas Paine, as quoted in Sloan, Clemens had come to the conclusion that:

...religions derive their authority from spurious claims by their founders that they had received revelations from God, transmitted to posterity as incontrovertibles as holy writ.

Bibles diminished the grandeur of the real God by straightening ‘him’ to the narrow confines of parochial imaginations.

Furthermore, he wrote that Nature is the true revelation. He considered “Reason and Logic” as “antidotes to ignorance, superstition, and humbuggery...”¹⁰

⁷ *The Works of Mark Twain: What is Man and other Philosophical Writings*, Edited by Paul Baender, (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of CA Press, 1973) 98 – 100.

⁸ Mark Twain, “Reflections on Religion,) in *The Outrageous Mark Twain*, Edited by Charles Neider, (New York: Doubleday, 1987), 34).

⁹ James A. Townsend, “Grace in the Arts: Mark Twain: A Bitter Battle with God,” *Journal of Grace Evangelical Society*(Autumn 2004), 59.

¹⁰ Gary Sloan, Mark Twain’s Secret Vendetta with the Almighty, “*Freethought Today*, May 2001, 1

The object of Twain's vendetta, however, was the New Testament, as he stated through Satan: "The Old one gives us a picture of these people's Deity as he was before he got religion, the other one gives us a picture of him as he appeared afterward. The Old Testament is interested mainly in blood and sensuality. The New one in Salvation by fire (*sic*)." ¹¹ Prior to Christianity, the God of creation was believed to be "stern, hard, resentful, jealous, and cruel." But when He came to Earth in the person of Jesus Christ – the "sweet, and gentle, merciful, forgiving" God who loved his "poor human children," he devised Hell, thereby forever depriving man of the escape from his earthly sorrows in "the blessed refuge of the grave" (*ibid*).

The Divinity of Christ

Regarding Christianity, Paine quotes Clemens' belief that:

"...the Sadducees didn't believe in hell. [Christ] brought them one. Nor the resurrection. He brought them that also.' He did not admit that there had been a Christ with the character and mission related by the gospels. 'It is all a myth. There had been Saviours in every age of the world. It is all just a fairy tale like the idea of Santa Claus.'" ¹²

As for Christ himself, Twain had written, "There has been only one Christian. They caught and crucified him-early" ("Bible Teaching and Religious Practice" *Wit and Wisdom*, 24). He also wrote that "Christ does not prove that He is God. Takes up the human race." ¹³ In another of his sardonic quoted in *Reflections on Religion*, he stated, "We divide [God] in two, bring half of him down to an obscure and infinitesimal corner of the world to confer salvation upon a little colony of Jews-and only Jews, no one else-and leave the other half of him enthroned in Heaven...." (Neider 31). Regarding the New Testament, he contended that, "The Christian Bible is a drug store. Its contents remain the same; but the medical practice changes" ("Bible Teaching and Religious Practice," *Wit and Wisdom*, 24). Regarding God Twain is quoted in "Reflections on Religion" He

claims not a single merit and hasn't one... whereas on earth He claims every merit in the entire catalogue of merits, yet practiced them only now and then, penuriously and finished by conferring Hell upon us.... (*ibid* 32-33)

He also questioned the purpose of Christianity, commenting:

His heavenly self, His Old Testament self is sweetness and gentleness and respectability, compared with His reformed earthly self [Christ]. In heaven he There is one notable thing about our Christianity: bad, bloody, merciless, money grabbing and predatory as it is...it is still... better than the Christianity of the Bible, with its prodigious crime-the invention of Hell...Ours is a terrible religion. The fleets of the world could swim in spacious comfort in the innocent blood it has spilt. (*ibid*, 36)

¹¹ Mark Twain, *Letters from the Earth*, Edited by Bernard DeVoto, (New York, Evanston, London: Harper & Row 1963), 44

¹² Albert Bigelow Paine, *Mark Twain: A Biography: The Personal and Literary Life of Samuel Longhorne Clemens*, 4 vols (New York, London: Harper & Brothers, 1912), 2:411. Hereafter cited by volume and page.

¹³ Howard G. Baetzold and Joseph, Editors, *The Bible According to Mark Twain*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), 327.

The History of and Irrationalities in the Bible

Behind his sardonic and biting humor, Clemens continually conveyed his ideas about what he considered to be the irrationalities in the Bible. Although he remarked “that he had read the entire Bible by the age of fifteen, “as early as 1870, at age thirty-five, he looked upon it as ‘a mass of fables and traditions, mere mythology” (Paine 2:411). In a letter to his longtime friend When Clemens was on a trip overseas, he wrote to his longtime friend, the Pastor Joe Twitchell, Clemens expressed his belief that the Bible was a work which had not been inspired by God. As Townsend quotes from a letter Clemens sent to Joseph Twichell in 1878:

...I have been almost a believer, but it immediately drifts away from me again. I don't believe one word of your Bible was inspired by God any more than any other book. I believe it is the work of man from beginning to end – atonement and all. (Townsend 60)

Among Clemens' works are several short stories about biblical characters, some of which include “Extracts from Adam's Diary,” (1904), “Eve's Diary,” (1906), “Noah's Diary” “Shem's Diary,” and

“Methuselah's Diary.”¹⁴ In *Personal Recollections of Joan of Arc* (1896), St Joan receives her instructions from on high. Thus it can be seen that he referred to the books of Genesis, Luke and Matthew in his writings. Furthermore, he noted that nothing in the Bible is original, that each race had confiscated ideas from another and put “them forth as fresh and new inspirations from on high.”¹⁵ Elsewhere he states, “Religion had its share in the changes of civilization and national character...” (“Bible Teaching and Religious Practice,” *Wit and Wisdom* 26).“ For example, he maintain that “the idea of the Golden Rule is from Confucius, the great flood from Babylon, there are legends of an Immaculate Conception in several pagan mythologies, among which are Egyptian, Hindu, Greek, and Roman” (Neider 34-36).

Clemens even declined to read the Bible with his wife, commenting that doing so would be hypocritical and contradictory to his reason. To quote, “I can't sit here and listen to it, letting you believe that I regard it... in the light of the Gospel, the word of God...” (Paine 2:411).

Samuel Clemens and Calvinism

Although Clemens never referred to himself as anything other than a Christian, he had long before “discarded [the ideas of] heaven and hell, the immortality of the soul, and the divinity of Jesus Christ” (Sloan 1). Nevertheless, despite the fact that he did not consider himself to be a believer in the orthodox sense, he always felt that his was nothing other than a “trained Presbyterian conscience” (Townsend 51). Quoting John Gerber, Pastor James A. Townsend wrote, “The Calvinistic doctrines of depravity and predestination created an intellectual context from which he never...escaped” (ibid). Nevertheless, he continued, “The majority of his later commentators and biographers believe that he was never a real Christian” (ibid 75).

In his later writings Twain's references to God are generally negative. For example, he wrote in his “Notebook,” “The book of nature tells us distinctly that God cares not a rap for us—nor for any living creature” (*Wit and Wisdom*, 27). And in “Reflections on Religion,” Twain stated that we “brazenly call our God the source of mercy, while we are aware all the time that there is not an authentic instance in history of His ever having exercised that virtue” (Neider, 43). In addition, God is considered to be “the source of morals, although historical evidence shows otherwise.” Furthermore, although He is called “Father,” no earthly father would “inflict upon

¹⁴ Twain wrote fragments of the latter three from the 1870s to 1905.

¹⁵ Allison Ensor, “Reviewed Works:” *Mark Twain and the Bible*, *American Literature*, Vol. 42, No. 3 (Nov 1970).

his child a thousandth part of the pains and miseries and cruelties upon which our God deals out to His children every day, and has dealt out to them daily during all the centuries since the crime of creating Adam was committed” (ibid 31). Nevertheless, in his both his fictional and non-fictional writings, Twain conveyed conflicting thoughts about God and religion.

Creation and Original Sin

Twain’s short essay entitled “God” (1905) begins, “He made all things. There is not a thing, great or small, which He did not make. He pronounced His work ‘good’” (Baender 107-108). And in the following section from Twain’s, *Letters from the Earth*, Twain begins with a description of creation:

The Creator sat upon the throne, thinking. Behind him stretched the illimitable continent of heaven, steeped in a glory of light and color; before him rose the black night of Space, like a wall. His mighty bulk towered rugged and mountain-like into the zenith, and his Divine head blazed there like a distant sun....

When the Creator had finished thinking, He said, ‘I have thought. Behold.’

He lifted His hand, and from it burst a fountain spray of fire, a million stupendous suns which clove the blackness and soared, away and away and away, diminishing in magnitude and intensity as they pierced the far frontiers of Space, until at last they were but as diamond nailheads under the domed vast roof of the universe.¹⁶

After God had created the universe, He created the Earth, “a small globe” where at first He created the animals as an experiment in *Morals and Conduct*” (4-5) When Satan sees that some tend to be ferocious while others are timid and frightened, he questions God’s reasons. God replies that each behaves in accordance with “the law of nature, which is the Law of God” (5). God then creates Man, which He considers His greatest experiment and masterpiece! Because Satan questions the works of God, he is banished from Heaven, and decides to go to Earth to “see how the Human-Race experiment was coming along” (7). When he arrives, he writes eleven letters to the Archangels Michael and Gabriel. In the third letter Satan tells them that God had created Adam and Eve, only to send them forth under a permanent curse, for they had disobeyed His command – not to eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge. By disobeying this commandment, however, Adam acquired what he needed: knowledge. Nevertheless, while disobeying God’s commandment would result in eventual death, it also allowed man to acquire the Moral Sense:

“that sense which differentiates man from the beast and sets him above the beast. Instead of below the beast – where one would suppose his proper place would be, since he is always foul-minded and guilty and the beast always clean-minded and innocent. It is like valuing a watch that must go wrong, above a watch that can’t. (17)

Twain continues, “The Church still prizes the Moral Sense as man’s noblest asset today, although the Church knows God had a distinctly poor opinion of it and did what he could in his clumsy way to keep his happy Children of the Garden from acquiring it” (ibid).

Man’s Place in the Universe

Although in *Letters from the Earth* God had created man as His noble experiment and masterpiece, in “What is Man,” written in 1906, (Baender, 124-214) Twain writes that the human

¹⁶ *Mark Twain: Letters from the Earth*, Edited by Bernard DeVoto, (New York, Evanston, London: Harper & Row, 4th ed., 1962), 3. Hereafter cited in text by page number.

race occupies but a trivial place in the order of existence, and Earth is nothing more than a fragment in the greater cosmos. Similarly, in *Three Thousand Years Among the Microbes* written in 1905, (Tuckey, 1980 161-281), an unfinished work which can be interpreted as a metaphor for man's place on Earth and Earth's place within an infinite universe, Twain expresses a similar idea through the narration of a cholera germ. Just as man occupies but a minute place in the universe, this cholera germ is but one of the many millions of microbes and bacilli that exist within the venous system of their only known world, a tramp named Blitzowsky, who "is their globe, lord of their universe" (ibid, 164). As the narrator/cholera germ states, "The germs think that the man they are occupying is the only world there is. The microbe is then informed that the "planet" he inhabits is:

as is that horizonless plain yonder to a grain of sand! And yet it itself is nothing—less than nothing—when its littleness is brought into contrast with the vast bulk of the millions of suns that swim those seas of space wherein it paddles lonely and unnoticed, save by its own sun, its own moon. (ibid 214)

Captain's Stormfield's Visit to Heaven written in 1909,¹⁷ a fable that mocks the conventional Christian view of an afterlife, is another commentary upon the fact that man and the planet he inhabits are but insignificant specks in an infinite universe.¹⁸ After Captain Stormfield's death, he travels for eons through the universe on his way to heaven. When at last he reaches an entrance, however, he sees swarms of unrecognizable creatures entering. At the gate he encounters a perplexed gatekeeper who, after asking him where he is from, for he does not recognize the name of the city, the country, or the even the planet from which Captain Stormfield had traveled. Although Stormfield believes that his world was unique, the gatekeeper disagrees, stating, "'The world,' ... 'there's billions of them!'" When told that it is the one the Savior saved, the gatekeeper replies that, "'the worlds He has saved are like to the gates of heaven in number [and asks], 'What astronomical system is your world in?'" But the gatekeeper does not recognize any of the planets in Stormfield's solar system except Jupiter, from which one man had come "eight or nine hundred years ago" (58).

The gatekeeper then assigns one of his clerks to consult a map of the universe. After having studied it for "a day or two," he thinks he has found Stormfield's solar system but, at first, fearing it might be "fleyspecks," he studies it through a microscope. Recognizing it at last, he tells his chief that he has found the solar system, but Earth is no more than a pinpoint known as "the Wart" in the vastness of space (67). Stormfield had come to the wrong entrance to Heaven after having fallen asleep and taken a wrong turn. One of many entrances to heaven, this is not the gate for Earthlings! (27). He is disappointed to find that in this

particular heaven there is no one to administer angel's wings, harps or halos! The gatekeeper doesn't even know the meaning of these things, stating:

'Heaven is a large place...Large empires have many and diverse customs...How can you imagine I ever learn the varied customs of the countless kingdoms of heaven?... I know the customs of prevail in these portions inhabited by peoples that are appointed to enter by my own gate....But the idea of learning the customs of the whole appalling expanse of heaven—O man, how insanely you talk'. (28)

As in *Captain Stormfield's Visit to Heaven* and *Three Thousand Years among the Microbes*, one small aspect of "The Chronicle of Young Satan," one of three manuscripts entitled

¹⁷ Stormfield was the name of the Clemens residence in Redding Connecticut.

¹⁸ *Mark Twain: Tales of Wonder*, Edited by David Ketterer, (Lincoln, London: University of Nebraska Press, 2003), 14—60. Hereafter cited in text by page number.

*The Mysterious Stranger Manuscripts*¹⁹ can also be interpreted as a metaphor for the insignificance of man's place in the universe. A young Satan, also known as Philip Traum (meaning dream)—the nephew of Satan, the fallen angel, after appearing to three young boys in a small village in Austria, creates a miniature community. While describing to the boys his travels in “the big worlds of our solar system and of other solar systems far away in the remotenesses (*sic*) of space and about the customs of the immortals that inhabit them, he pays no attention to that which he has created, much as Twain has indicated his belief that after having created man, God has remained aloof from their daily lives. When two of the little workman in the miniature community created by Satan argue and come to blows, it is Satan who “... [reaches] out his hand and [crushes] the life out of them with his fingers, [throws] them way, [wipes] the red from his fingers...and [goes] on talking...” And when the prayers of the citizens of this microscopic world begin to annoy Satan/Traum, rather than answering them or even listening to them, he “takes the heavy board seat out of [the boys'] swing...and brings it down, mashing the little people “into the earth just as if they had been flies ...” (49-50)).

Man as Machine

In several of his writings Twain contends that man is no more than a machine which is subject to a greater will in a world in which each of the thousands of species that inhabit it behaves in accordance with its nature. For example, in *Three Thousand Years Among the Microbes*, the narrator states that the creatures that inhabit this “Earth” are bound by “chains of training, custom, convention, association, disposition, and environment—in a word, circumstance...” (Tuckey 1980, 213). In “What is Man,” a Socratic dialogue between a “Young Man” and an “Old Man,” the “Old Man” tells the “Young Man” that God devised that which gives man life. “God made him a machine.” Regardless of rank, “all are slaves, and no slave... is freer than another” (Tuckey 1980, 214).

In another short work entitled “In the Animal's Court” (1905) (Baender, 121-123), the accused, responding to a charge by a heavenly court, that he is “poorly contrived and badly constructed,” defends his behavior, pleading that he “did not contrive [himself; he] did not construct [himself].” The court goes on to accuse him of poor behavior, stating:

You have moved when you should not have moved;...you have turned out of your course when you should have gone straight..., you have moved swiftly through crowds when the law and public weal forbade a speed like that;...you leave a stench behind you wherever you go, and you persist in this, although you know it is improper and that other machines refrain from doing it. (ibid)

In his defense the man states, “I am a machine. I am slave to the law of my maker, I have to obey it, under all conditions. I do nothing of myself. My forces are set in motion by outside influences, I never set them in motion myself” (ibid 123). Twain includes this idea in *Letters from the Earth* as well, when Satan writes to the Archangels Michael and Gabriel that “The human being is a machine. An automatic machine, it is composed of thousand of mechanisms...over which man himself has no authority... no control” (Devoto 238). And Twain concludes *Reflections on Religion* by excusing all of man's behavior, stating:

God and God alone, is responsible for every act and word of a human being's life between cradle and grave....In our secret hearts we have no hesitation in proclaiming as an unthinking fool anybody who thinks he believes that he is by

¹⁹ *Mark Twain: The Mysterious Stranger Manuscripts*, Edited by William M. Gibson, (Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of CA Press, 1969). Hereafter cited in text by page number.

any possibility capable of committing a sin against God—or who thinks he thinks he is under obligations to God and owes Him thanks, reverence and worship. and anyone who feels he owes God reverence and worship is a fool! (Neider 30)

Other works, however, belie this contention. For example, in *Captain Stormfield's Visit to Heaven*, Twain reflects upon the influence of the clergy upon the actions of the man. Just as beings have no sense of right in wrong in heaven, neither did they when alive. Through the words of a character named Sandy, a friend of Captain Stormfield, Twain denounces the actions of God, the clergy and man:

In church it was a common thing for the preacher to look out over his congregation and speak of them as the noblest work of God... These little animals were having wars all the time, and raising armies and building navies and striving after the approval of God every way they could. And whenever there was a savage country that needed civilizing, they went there and took it, and divided it up among several enlightened monarchs, and civilized it... generally with Bibles and Bullets and Taxes. And the way they did whoop –up Morals, and patriotism, and religion, and the Brotherhood of Man was noble to see..... each person could look right into every other person's mind and read what was in it, but he thought his own mind was concealed from everybody but himself! (Ketterer 53)

Predestination

Twain also questions the idea of predestination. In “The Chronicle of Young Satan,” Satan/Traum, points out that if Columbus had skipped:

...the triflingest (*sic*) little link in the chain of acts projected and made inevitable by his first childish act, it would have changed his whole subsequent life and he would have become a priest and died obscure in an Italian village, and America would not have been discovered for two centuries afterward. (Gibson 116)

To exemplify how one small change can alter the course of a person's life, Satan alters the life of Nikolaus, a friend of the narrator, Theodor Fischer, by having him arise two minutes later than his usual time and arrive just in time to attempt to save his friend Lisa from drowning. Struggling in deep water, however, both drown. When Theodor derides him for his act, Satan replies, “I have changed Nikolaus's life, and this has changed Lisa's.” Death had brought him “blessed relief” from what would have been a life of misery. If Satan had not altered his life, Nikolaus “would [have saved her life] ...twelve days from now—a deed begun and ended in six minutes—and get for all reward...forty-six years of sorrow and suffering.” As for Lisa, because of her injuries which would have resulted from the near drowning accident, Nikolaus's act saved her from a life of “pollution, shame, depravity, crime, ending with death at the hands of the executioner” (ibid 118-119).

The Power of Prayer

Twain's short piece entitled *The War Prayer* (written in 1905 and first published in 1923).²⁰ Twain questions the power of prayer vs. predestination. As soldiers march off to battle, resplendent in their military uniforms, a small congregation prays for their victory. Unnoticed, “an aged stranger” enters the sanctuary. When he arrives at the pulpit, he pushes the preacher aside and tells the worshippers, “I come from the Throne—bearing a message from Almighty God'.” He then tells them that it is up to *them* to ask God for victory, saying, “He has heard the

²⁰ Mark Twain, *The War Prayer*, Drawings by John Groth, (New York: Perennial, 1968).

prayer of His servant your shepherd and will grant it *if such be your desire* (italics mine). ‘Ye have prayed it...’ But victory for them will bring about hunger, homelessness, poverty, desolation and travail for the vanquished. Do they care? His message is that they have been given the power to prevent these catastrophic results:

if ye still desire it, speak!

The messenger of the Most High waits.

The congregation, however, ignores him, considering him a lunatic “because there was no sense in what he said.” The question is would their prayer have altered the course of destiny? (ibid).

In other writings as well, Twain indicated his disbelief in the power of prayer. For example in *Huckleberry Finn*, Huck states, “...Miss Watson she took me in the closet and prayed, but nothing came of it. She told me to pray every day, and whatever I asked for I would get it. But it warn’t so. I tried it.”²¹

Anger against God

Letters from the Earth, Twain’s final work, is considered to be “... the essence of his case against God.” As he wrote in his Notebook, “God’s inhumanity to man makes countless thousands mourn. (“Notebook” *Wit and Wisdom* 27). God also seemingly contradicts His own Ten Commandments. Although the seventh commandment states, “Thou shalt not kill,” Satan points out that God Himself, the so-called “Father of Mercy,” has brought about wholesale death, for example all the innocent men, women and children when he sent the floods, or when He commanded Moses to kill the Midianites...: “*all the virgins, all the men, all the babies, all the ‘creatures that breathe’*,” (sic). Although the eighth commandment states, “Thou shalt not commit adultery,” women are sold into slavery and prostitution, and priests seduce young women. (DeVoto 52-53).

Twain ends his diatribe against God through Satan’s letters by pointing out the irony of the Sermon on the Mount, stating:

The mouth that uttered these immense sarcasms, these giant hypocrisies, is the same that ordered the wholesale massacre of the Midianitish man and babies and cattle; the wholesale destruction of house and city; the wholesale banishment of the virgins into a filthy and unspeakable slavery. (ibid)

Twain/Satan’s final comment, however, is another bitter condemnation of the clergy:

The Beatitudes and the quoted chapters from Numbers and Deuteronomy ought always to be read from the pulpit together; then the congregation would get an all-round view of Our Father in Heaven. Yet not in a single instance have I ever known a clergyman to do this. (ibid 55)

In the words of Huckleberry Finn: “[The preacher] never charged nothing for his preaching, and it was worth it, too” (*Huckleberry Finn, Wit and Wisdom*, 26).

God and Satan

In his later works, Twain frequently articulates his views concerning man and his place in the greater universe through the mouth of Satan or a Satanic character. Another of his most bitter indictments of God appears in *The Mysterious Stranger* manuscripts, which he began to write as early as 1897 or 1898 and never completed; they were first published 1916. In his article regarding the role of Satan in *The Mysterious Stranger Manuscripts*, Stanley Brodwin states, “It

²¹ Mark Twain, *Huckleberry Finn* (New York: Bantam Classics, 2003), 10—11).

is in this group of stories that Twain reached an identification of himself as a creative artist with the divine-like creative powers of an unfallen Satan. It is here that we receive his final condemnation of the damned human race and attempt to describe the nature of the universe.”²²

He goes on to describe four phases in Twain’s depictions of Satan:

1. The conventional tempter and “Father of Lies,” in “The Man that Corrupted Hadleyburg” (1899).
2. In “That Day in Eden (A Passage from “Satan’s Diary” and “Eve Speaks” (ca. 1900), Satan is a sympathetic commentator on the tragedy of man’s fall, but one who fails to make Adam and Eve understand the concepts which would have saved them.
3. In *Letters from the Earth*, Satan becomes a mischievous, sarcastic questioner of God’s ways, writing secret letters to St. Gabriel and St. Michael about the absurdity of man, God’s experiment.
4. In “The Mysterious Stranger” stories (1897–1908), Satan is presented (with some variations) as a force of spiritual though amoral “innocence” charged with divine-like creative power. Though man...is consistently viewed as a base creature in each of the main versions, it is clear that Mark Twain’s imagination was gripped by the relationships among the universe, Satan and Man. (Brodwin 217)

In his introduction to *Mark Twain: The Mysterious Stranger Manuscripts*, William Gibson describes four versions of the narrative, none of which were completed:

1. The “St. Petersburg Fragment,” a nineteen page manuscript from a version of the story that was set in St. Petersburg and never completed.
2. “The Chronicle of Young Satan,” in which “Eseldorf,” [meaning “Assville,” or “Donkeytown”], as De Voto referred to it, is Mark Twain’s own title for a story of some 423 page manuscript which breaks off in mid chapter in the court of an Indian rajah, where Satan is competing with the court magician.
3. “Schoolhouse Hill,” or the Hannibal version, a fragment of 16,000 words, is first adumbrated in Mark Twain’s notebook in November 1898. It begins: “Story of Little Satan, jr. [also known as “44”] who came to {Petersburg (Hannibal)}, went to school, was popular and greatly liked by {Huck and Tom} who knew his secret.... Twain’s notes suggest that he intended to picture...some of the life of his own Hannibal boyhood as a background for 44’s tricks, miracles and reforms.
4. “No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger,” or “Print Shop” version is a story of 530 manuscript pages, set like “Chronicle” in Austria, but in 1490, not long after the invention of printing. (Gibson, Intro, 8-9)

This final version was written between 1902 and 1908.

Gibson writes, “The primary character in all the manuscripts, Satan, alias “No. 44,” is “the most complex in his acts, his satirical bent, the ‘fatal music of his voice,’ his Socratic way of speaking, and his origins” (ibid 14). Although no one really knows why Twain calls him “44,” there are several interesting theories. One is that of Abraham Kahn, who interprets it through numerology, stating, “there are twenty-two letters in the Hebrew Alphabet.” “The number [also]

²² Stanley Brodwin, “Mark Twain’s Masks of Satan: The Final Phase,” *American Literature*, Vol 45, No. 2, (May, 1973), 206—227.

acquires mystical significance in several Jewish connections, as in the ...Book of Creation...²³ In addition, the number twenty-two “recurs at several points in the Bible; there were twenty-two kings in the Davidic line and Psalm 22 begins with Jesus’ last words on the cross.” Another possible source of its mystical significance is the fact “there are twenty-two major trumps in the pack of Tarot cards, which are connected with twenty-two mystic paths.” Kahn also speculates that “44” may represent the “figure of ‘The Wandering Jew’.”²⁷

Barbara Schidt, however, considers the theories of Louis Budd and Kent Rasmussen to be the most likely.²⁴ One of Budd’s theories is similar to Kahn’s in that he notes Twain showed “an interest in Jewish lore during his stay in Austria [1898], and he could have picked up forty-four as a name for a quasi god that existed prior to the Old Testament fall of Adam and Eve.” Rasmussen theorizes that “Twain may have seen it as an abbreviated form of 144, the highest number in the standard multiplication table.” Another of his theories is that the “number 144 is suggestive because there are 12 feet, or 144 inches in two fathoms – the nautical depth equivalent to the steamboat leadsman’s measurement of ‘Mark Twain’ ” (Schidt).

Quoting Whitman, Gibson puts forth the theory that “No. 44” forms one side of what he terms a “Square Deific”:

In Mark Twain’s theology, he is the truth-seeker momentarily banished from heaven, the preacher Koheleth.²⁵ He thus usurps certain functions of Christ, the consoler... The Father of the Old Testament and Missouri Presbyterianism forms the second side of the square – severe, jealous and vengeful. He is distinct from but sometimes shades into the eternal Creator, of whom Clemens thought in astronomical terms – a supernatural Power not so much indifferent to man as wholly unaware of them. Forty-four is speaking to this last, greatest deity when he tells Theodor that “Man is to me as the Red Spider is to the elephant.”

Of the Quadernity, it is Satan the rebel, nonetheless, who figures most often in Twain’s writings and who exhibits the richest development. (Gibson 15) stating, ”Man is a museum of disgusting diseases, a home of impurities; he comes to-day and is gone tomorrow. He begins as dirt and departs as a stench: I am of the aristocracy of the Imperishables. And man has the Moral Sense.” (Gibson 55). Because Satan lacks feelings, he has no understanding of morality or immorality.

Of the Quadernity, it is Satan the rebel, nonetheless, who figures most often in Twain’s writings and who exhibits the richest development. (Gibson, 15) Devoid of emotion, Satan/Traum tells the boys that while man is made of dirt,²⁶ he (Satan) is not, stating, “Man is a museum of disgusting diseases, a home of impurities; he comes today and is gone tomorrow, he begins as dirt and departs as a stench; I am of the aristocracy of the Imperishables (*sic*). And man has the Moral Sense” (Gibson, 55). Because Satan lacks feelings, he has no understanding of morality or immortality.

²³ Shalom J. Kahn, *Mark Twain’s Mysterious Stranger: A Study of the Manuscript Texts*, (Columbia, London: University of Missouri Press, 1978), 206.

²⁴ Barbara Schidt, “Mark Twain & the Significance of the Number 44: A Review of Scholars Theories,” 4—6, <<http://www.Twainquotes.com>>

²⁵ Heb: (‘The Preacher’) c. 3rd century B.C. The unknown author of the biblical book known as Ecclesiastes. *Who’s Who in the Bible: Two Volumes in One*; Joan Comay, *Who’s Who in the Old Testament Together with the Apocrypha*; Ronald Brownrigg, *Who’s Who in the New Testament*, (New York: Bonanza Books, 1980), 248

²⁶ The name “Adam” is derived from the Hebrew *Adama*, meaning “Earth.” (Comay, 38)

Dream vs. Reality

In *The Great Dark*, the narrator questions a mischievous being called the “Superintendent of Dreams” about the reality of having fallen asleep and awakened in a ship which travels in an ocean that exists in a universe contained within a drop of water under a microscope lens. Regarding the situation, the Superintendent responds, “*Are you quite sure it is a dream?*” You have spent your whole life in this ship. And this is *real* life. Your other life is the dream.” Even his wife has trouble remembering any other life and insists that this is the only life they’ve known, leaving him unsure (Tuckey 1980, 102).

Nevertheless, it is in “Number 44,” the third and longest manuscript of *The Mysterious Stranger*, that Twain attempts to incorporate aspects of many of his other works: dream and reality; time and space; the finite vs. infinity; mortality vs. immortality.

In a letter to his friend Reverend Joseph Twichell, dated July 28, 1904, shortly after the death of his wife Livy, Twain wrote an early version of the ending of *No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger*:

(A part of each day – or night) as they have been looking to me the past 7 years: as being **NON-EXISTENT** (*sic*). That is, that there is *nothing*. That there is no God & no universe; that there is only empty space, & in it a lost & homeless & and wandering & companionless & and indestructible *thought*. And that I am that thought. And God, & the Universe, & Time, & Life, & Death, & Joy & Sorrow and Pain only a grotesque & brutal *dream*, evolved from the frantic imagination of that insane Thought (*sic*).

He developed this further in the conclusion of *No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger* by stating, “Life itself is only a vision, a dream...*Nothing exists save empty space - and you (sic)*.”

There is no God, no universe, no human race, no heaven, no hell. It is all a Dream, a grotesque and foolish dream. Nothing exists but You. And You are but a *Thought* – a vagrant Thought, a useless Thought, a homeless Thought, wandering among the empty eternities. (Gibson, 404-405)

Samuel Clemens died on April 21, 1910 at age seventy-five, four months after the death of his daughter Jean. It seems that he had never resolved the emotional and religious conflicts which so haunted him and which he expressed so poignantly in his letters and his literature.²⁷ Regarding the certainty of death, he had once written in his “Notebook,” “It is human to exaggerate the merits of the dead” (*Wit and Wisdom*, 49).

²⁷ *The Autobiography of Mark Twain*, Edited by Charles Neider, (New York: HarperCollins, 1959), footnote, 485.

References

- Baender, Paul, ed. *The Works of Mark Twain: What is Man and Other Philosophical Writings*. Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1973.
- Baetzold, Howard and Joseph B McCullough, eds. *The Bible According to Mark Twain: Irreverent Writings on Eden, Heaven, and The Flood by America's Master Satirist*. New York: Touchstone, 1995.
- Brodwin, Stanley. "Mark Twain's Masks of Satan: The Final Phase." *American Literature*, Vol. 45, No. 2. (May 1973): 206-227.
- Comay, Joan and Ronald Brownrigg. *Who's Who in the Bible: The Old Testament and Apocrypha; The New Testament*. New York: Bonanza Books, 1980.
- DeVoto, Bernard, ed. *Mark Twain: Letters from the Earth*. New York, Evanston and London: Harper and Row, 1962.
- Ensor, Allison and D. M. McKeithan. "Review, *Mark Twain and the Bible*." *American Literature*, Vol. 42, No. 3, (Nov., 1970): 410-411.
- Gibson, William M., ed. *Mark Twain: The Mysterious Stranger Manuscripts*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005.
- Kahn, Shalom J. *Mark Twain's Mysterious Stranger: A Study of the Manuscript Texts*. Columbia and London: University of Missouri press, 1978.
- Ketterer, David, ed. *Mark Twain: Tales of Wonder*. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2003.
- Messent, Peter. "Mark Twain, Joseph Twichell, and Religion." *Nineteenth Century Literature*. Vol. 58, No 3. (Dec., 2003): 268-402.
- Neider, Charles, ed. *The Autobiography of Mark Twain*. New York: Perennial Classics, 1990.
.....*The Outrageous Mark Twain*. New York: Doubleday, 1987.
- Paine, Albert Bigelow. *Mark Twain: A Biography*, 4 Vols. New York and London: Harper & Brothers Pub., 1912.
- Powers, Ron. *Mark Twain: A Life*. New York, London, Toronto and Sydney: Free Press, 2005
- Schidt, Barbara. "Mark Twain & the Significance of the Number 44: A Review of the Scholars' Theories." <http://www.twainquotes.com>.
- Sloan, Gary. "Mark Twain's Secret Vendetta with the Almighty." *Freethought Today*. (May 2001): 1-5.
- Townsend, Pastor James A. "Grace in the Arts: Mark Twain: A Bitter Battle with God." *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* (Autumn 2004): 49-76.
- Tuckey, John S. *The Devil's Race-Track: Mark Twain's Great Dark Writings*. Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1980.
.....*Mark Twain's The Mysterious Stranger and the Critics*. Belmont, CA., Wadsworth Pub., 1968.
- Twain, Mark. *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. New York: Bantam Classics, 2003.

Forum on Public Policy

.....*Collected Tales, Sketches, Speeches, & Essays 1891-1910*. New York: The Library of America, 1992.

.....*Personal Recollections of Joan of Arc*. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1896.

.....*The War Prayer*. With Drawings by John Groth. New York: Perennial Classics, 2002.

.....*The Wit and Wisdom of Mark Twain: A Book of Quotations*. Mineola, N.Y.: Dover Pub.,
1999.

.....Mark Twain's *The Mysterious Stranger and the Critics*. Belmont, CA., Wadsworth
Pub., 1968.

Twain, Mark. *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. New York: Bantam Classics, 2003.

.....*Collected Tales, Sketches, Speeches, & Essays 1891-1910*. New York: The Library of America, 1992.

.....*Personal Recollections of Joan of Arc*. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1896.

.....*The War Prayer*. With Drawings by John Groth. New York: Perennial Classics, 2002.

.....*The Wit and Wisdom of Mark Twain: A Book of Quotations*. Mineola, N.Y.: Dover Pub.,
1999.

Who's Who in the Bible: Two Volumes in One; Joan Comay, *Who's Who in the Old Testament Together
with the Apocrypha* ; Ronald Brownrigg, *Who's Who in the New Testament*. New York: Bonanza Books,
1980.

Published by the Forum on Public Policy

Copyright © The Forum on Public Policy. All Rights Reserved. 2008.