

MARK TWAIN VERSUS GOD: TRACING
TWAIN'S RELIGIOUS DEVELOPMENT
THROUGH HIS LIFE AND WORK

THESIS

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by

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DEDICATION

For my mom,
Ora Catherine Haley Duncan, whose
courage and perseverance inspire me
to reach for my dreams,
and
for my wife,
Tricia Gardner, whose spirit and
strength help me get there

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Abbreviations

<i>AHF:</i>	<i>The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn</i>
<i>ATS:</i>	<i>The Adventures of Tom Sawyer</i>
<i>CFMA:</i>	<i>Chapters From My Autobiography</i>
<i>CY:</i>	<i>A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court</i>
<i>ETS:</i>	<i>Early Tales and Sketches</i>
<i>FOM:</i>	<i>Fables of Man</i>
<i>JA.</i>	<i>Personal Recollections of Joan of Arc</i>
<i>LFE:</i>	<i>Letters from the Earth</i>
<i>LL:</i>	<i>The Love Letters of Mark Twain</i>
<i>LY:</i>	<i>Mark Twain's Last Years as a Writer</i>
<i>MSM:</i>	<i>The Mysterious Stranger Manuscripts</i>
<i>MTL:</i>	<i>Mark Twain's Letters</i>
<i>MTS:</i>	<i>Mark Twain Speaks for Himself</i>
<i>SL:</i>	<i>Selected Letters of Mark Twain</i>
<i>TIA:</i>	<i>The Innocents Abroad</i>
<i>TMB:</i>	<i>Mark Twain's Travels with Mr. Brown</i>
<i>WIM:</i>	<i>What is Man? and Other Philosophical Writings</i>
<i>WMT:</i>	<i>The Writings of Mark Twain</i>

Introduction

“The easy confidence with which I know another man’s religion is folly teaches me to suspect that my own is also.” -- Mark Twain

Mark Twain’s¹ rather acerbic relationship with religion is well documented if somewhat inconsistently concluded. From Ron Powers’ assertion that Twain outright rejected a belief in a Christian God and Maxwell Geismar’s conclusion that Twain was an eloquent and outraged atheist to Alexander Jones’s portrayal of Twain as an agnostic with Calvinist guilt and Allison Ensor’s argument that Twain had the will to disbelieve but could not escape his lifelong fascination with the Bible, scholars appear to argue that Twain’s unorthodox religious belief system fell within a range somewhere between model agnosticism and outright atheism. These inconsistent conclusions may be merely the result of literary critics who are ill prepared to comprehend Mark Twain’s religious explorations in his writings and are predisposed (because of temperament or general lack of interest) not to examine it more thoroughly. William Phipps argues, “those specializing in the field of American literature tend to have little interest in, or knowledge of, the breadth of American and world religions” (Phipps 5). Indeed, as much as intellectuals often value the separation of church and state, there seems to be, among academics and critics at least, an equal or greater value placed on the separation of religion and literary scholarship.

It is also possible, however, that these scholarly differences of opinion about Twain's religion are the result of Twain's own seemingly incongruous statements on the subject throughout his career. His writings and musings on religion were the result of his own deep psychological exploration of the topic in an attempt to resolve his own personal guilt and find rational answers to theological questions that plagued him all his life. His journey didn't advance in one direction chronologically, rather, it advanced haphazardly; sometimes he rejected ideas one year and adopted them again a few years later, only to reject them a second time. His outright dismissal of Christianity in some of his writings is belied by his marriage to a devoutly Christian woman and his deep personal friendships with famous clergymen. Furthermore, he could blast religious piety and Christian doctrine in an essay while simultaneously praising their values in personal letters.

Twain was nothing if not mutable, and this is one of the attributes that makes his writing so attractive to scholars and readers alike. It allows them to view him how they choose. They can find arguments throughout his works to support any bias they have. Twain often explored the nature of God, the morality of man, the curiosities of the physical world, the vastness of the universe, and the intrigue of the unknown in his writings. The danger for scholars, particularly when it comes to his religion, is trying to deduce a rational belief system for Twain based on any one, or selected group, of his writings. Taking one or even a few written examples of Twain's hard-line dialogue to support a particular religious viewpoint is difficult, for there are equally as many works and statements that can be used to negate it. If scholars desire to see him as an atheist, they can point to the many instances in which Twain dismisses religion, such as in the reported conversation with Joseph Twichell in which he said "I don't believe in your

religion at all,” or in his admission to Livy, “I don’t believe in this Bible” (Messent 380, MTB II: 411). Of course there is also his famous 1885 letter to Charles Stoddard in which he says “I have found that as perfect a peace is to be found in absolute unbelief” (Gross 261). For those who equate irreligion with atheism, that argument can be made fairly easily from these quotes. However, one need merely point to Twain’s flat assertion written in 1884: “I believe in God the Almighty, whose goodness, justice, and mercy are manifested in his works” to counter that argument (WIM 56). Of course, in the last paragraph of Twain’s last written work, he also contradicts himself with “there is no God” (MSM 405). The end result is often that Twain’s mutability allows us to make him into whatever we desire, always backed up with proof mined from his writings.

For all of the various conclusions of scholars, however, it is difficult to accept that an author who so readily drew upon Biblical passages in his writing and published dozens of essays and short stories about God and religion would ever completely reject both out of hand. It seems more logical to suggest that this prolific writer of religious satire was a deeply spiritual thinker who merely came to disagree with some of the fundamental tenets of Christian religious doctrine, that of theodicy² and *regula fidei* (Rule of Faith).³ For Twain to reject the rule of religion and blind faith, however, does not necessarily indicate a rejection of God. On the contrary, Twain spent the majority of his career searching for a rational justification for the God he did believe in. That he chose to criticize the basis of a manmade religion along with hypocritical preachers, and ridicule unquestioning believers in his writing, is more a reflection of his intense rational mind and his lifelong search for divine justice than it is a rejection of God’s existence altogether.

To truly begin understanding Twain's personal religious development and evolving philosophy then, we must take a more holistic view of his life and his works. We must examine the world in which Twain's writing came to be so popular and understand in broad terms the nature of the social, political and religious society in which he developed. Then we can begin to examine Twain's personal life, from his early childhood to his strict Presbyterian upbringing, from his Deist father to his discovery of Paine's *The Age of Reason*, from the death of Henry to the death of Lily. From this holistic perspective, it is possible to begin seeing a broader picture that tracks Twain's religious awakening and the development of his personal religious philosophy.

Twain and the 19th Century

Twain's ongoing exploration of God and concurrent excoriation of religion in the late 19th century is remarkable in part for its reflection of the underlying national mood at that time. Prior to the Civil War, the country was separated by more than the Mason-Dixon line and issues of slavery. Religious affiliations in America ranged from the Quakers and Transcendentalists of the Northeast to the Anglican and Catholic denominations in the larger metropolitan and industrialized cities. Furthermore, many of the dominant Protestant churches that had grown with the westward expansion had split over issues ranging from slavery to Calvinism and Evangelicalism. The Episcopal Church, for example, was divided between the High Church and the Evangelicals. The Presbyterian Church in America divided into the Old School Calvinist oriented church, of which Twain was indoctrinated as a child, and the New School church of the North that rejected the Southern church's Biblical justification for slavery. For the most part, the

multitude of churches and their congregants avoided issues of nationalism and were content to focus on their individual systems of faith. The Civil War would shake them out of such complacency.

In the early 19th century, there was a generalized national pride in America for its newfound independence, but the nation was primarily a loose conglomeration of independent states and regional identities held together by common economic interests and the need for a common defense. What general national identity did exist was focused more on the idea of manifest destiny and economic opportunity as the country expanded westward. However, following the turmoil of the Civil War and the investment in the re-United States made through blood and sacrifice, Americans were faced with the difficult task of establishing a common national identity, and their widespread religious differences posed a challenge to the spirit of a unified nation. Hans Guggisberg points out that during this time “the chief doctrines of American Protestantism underwent significant changes. Calvinism was pushed into the background by Deism, and deism was superseded by revivalism” (Guggisberg 574). In the North, Emerson was leading the Transcendentalist movement while the massive influx of poor and working-class Catholic immigrants swelled the ranks of the Roman church.

The already remarkable rate of literacy in America, fueled by religious education, drove demand for a new national media of newspapers, periodicals and publishing houses that, in turn, offered a level of guidance for the American public in searching for their identity. It was the birth of a mass media that had never before existed in world history. The growing literary circles of New England were a significant influence in the North, but the populace of the South still carried a deep mistrust of Northern intellectuals,

particularly in light of their life under Reconstruction. Southern writers of the time held great influence in the South, but found few audiences in the intellectual and industrialized North.

It was into this environment that Mark Twain began submitting newspaper accounts, first of his days on the Mississippi, then of his adventures in the West. His particular combination of Southern wit and intellectual satire found a national audience starved for a common hero. Mark Twain was the ideal candidate for such a role. Born in Missouri and the son of slave-owning parents, Twain was a credible voice for the vanquished South. He had been a riverboat pilot on the Mississippi and had even carried a rifle, albeit very briefly, for the Confederates. He was raised in the “Old School” Presbyterian Church and his pocket mining and rough riding adventures spoke to the fierce independence of the Southern farmers.

At the same time, Twain’s writings were intellectually satirical and often skewered the close-minded traditionalists in a way that many readers of the North enjoyed. He was in the West primarily due to his brother Orion’s tireless work on the election campaign of Abraham Lincoln. Orion had been appointed Secretary of the Nevada territories as a reward and, by association, provided Twain with instant credibility among Northern readers. Twain’s journalism work in Nevada and San Francisco, coupled with his friendship with the popular humorist Artemis Ward, helped establish Twain’s credibility as the pre-eminent “Southern” voice in the North.

Most significantly, Twain’s own spiritual revolution and his writings about it closely mirrored the major trends and developments in America’s religious turbulence of the time. The result was a symbiotic and dynamic relationship between Twain and his

growing national audience that provided the demand and the financial rewards necessary to fuel his inner-search. In exchange, Twain became one of America's most prolific and prodigious writers and performers for almost 50 years, constantly amusing, challenging and engaging his audience on issues ranging from racism and politics to marriage and family. Underlying it all was his constant search for both personal salvation and a justifiable divinity; two seemingly contradictory issues that were powerfully and inextricably linked in Twain's heart and mind.

What Twain needed was the God promised to him in the New Testament – a God of forgiveness and benevolence. The doctrine of predestination and the Calvinist God of Twain's strict Presbyterian upbringing, however, often contradicted those Biblical teachings. The Christianity he had known and experienced all his life failed him in his needs. Ultimately, Twain would have to develop his own sense of God, based on a rational exploration of morality, sin, humanity and the universe. It is, therefore, the purpose of this thesis to examine Mark Twain not as the mere creator of American literary icons like Huck Finn and Tom Sawyer, but as a religious philosopher whose greatest achievements may be found in his explorations of human morality and God.

Early Religious Influences

In 1865, Mark Twain wrote a letter to his older brother, Orion, stating that he had a powerful ambition to be a "preacher of the gospel" only he could not supply himself with the necessary stock in trade – religion (Powers 156). What happened in Twain's

childhood and early life that would lead him to make such a statement is a combination of Calvinist Presbyterian indoctrinization and a series of personal life tragedies that left a highly independent and intelligent young man without a religion he could believe in.

Twain was born eight weeks premature on the frontier of 1835 Missouri. His mother, Jane, had little hope for his survival: “When I first saw him, I could see no promise in him” (Wecter 44).⁴ Jane had already experienced the harshness of frontier life with the loss of her second child, Pleasant, born in 1830, who survived only three weeks. However, Jane was a devout Christian believer (though also deeply superstitious), and the first four years of Twain’s life found him alive, but mostly sickly and bedridden, with his mother praying over him and reading to him from the Bible. This early inculcation of religious dogma would instill a deep-seated baseline for the nature of evil and guilt that would both haunt Twain’s consciousness and fuel his lifelong drive for personal absolution.

Reinforcing Twain’s sense of personal guilt was his belief that he was somehow responsible for the untimely deaths of his siblings. When Twain’s older sister Margaret died of yellow fever in 1839, the young boy sleepwalked into her room shortly before her death and spent a few moments plucking at her coverlets. Jane took this to be a sign of Twain’s ‘second sight’ and psychic abilities, a belief that Twain adopted as well. When his brother Benjamin died of yellow fever two years later, Jane inexplicably made each of her remaining four children enter his room and touch the cheek of the dead boy. Twain never forgot it. His young guilt over his role in Margaret’s death was deepened by what he came to believe was his culpability in Benjamin’s death. In 1892, Twain jotted a note in his journal that read “Dead brother Ben. My treachery to him” and later in 1897, Twain

would write a short, unfinished piece titled “The case of memorable treachery” in which he recounted the touching of his brother’s cheek (Powers 29).

Jane responded to Benjamin’s death by joining a strict Calvinist Presbyterian church in their new home of Hannibal, Missouri. She also enrolled all four children in the Church’s Sunday school and walked them there every week. Here, the young Twain received a full dose of the fire and brimstone sermons of the pulpit along with weekly Sunday school readings that praised the sanctimony of good little boys and promised guaranteed reward for their piety and warned of the pain and death always delivered upon bad little boys for their wickedness. The Old School Presbyterian Church of Hannibal, Missouri was a very long way from the new enlightenment burgeoning in the Northeast. The Presbyterian ministers still preached the doctrine of double predestination⁵ and refused to believe that sinfulness could be absolved. Ron Powers succinctly sums up Twain’s reactions: “A boy who already felt himself guilty for the death[s] of his brother [and sister] could conceivably take that kind of message to heart” (30).

At an early age, then, Twain had already seemingly given up on Heaven as an option, or at least the only Heaven with which he was familiar, and his naturally inquisitive and independent mind led him into a number of youthful adventures that he would eventually immortalize in *Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn*. However, Twain also had an intuitive sense of moral righteousness, possibly instilled in him by his Deistic father, which was at constant odds with his feelings of personal guilt about his siblings. This led him to embrace his younger brother Henry as a potential savior for Twain’s own wicked ways. Twain recognized in Henry all the qualities of the good little boy of his Sunday school readers. When their father Marshall died in 1847, Twain took his younger

brother under his wing and finished raising Henry. Twain saw in the young boy an opportunity to absolve some of his own guilt over Benjamin and Margaret's deaths by raising Henry in a mold of moral perfection, ready for Heaven should he be elected. Henry's tragic death on the Mississippi eleven years later, however, would crush these hopes and alter Twain's religious vision permanently. It would set him upon a new theological quest for divine truth.

CHAPTER I

HENRY CLEMENS AND THOMAS PAINE

Mark Twain once remarked in a letter to Olivia Langdon, his mother-in-law, that in his entire life, only five people really knew him well, and of those, he felt sympathy with only two: Henry and Livy. This seemingly innocuous statement by Twain has never been recognized for the significance it deserves relative to how he developed his identity both as a person and as a writer. Twain had five siblings, three daughters, millions of admirers, and countless friends and acquaintances stretching from California to New York over the course of his lifetime. He had close friendships with such notable icons as William Dean Howells, Joseph Twichell, Henry Ward Beecher and even President Ulysses S. Grant. He had mined for silver with hard drinking, dangerous men and traveled the world with the aristocratic Charles Langdon and Mary Fairbanks. However, of all the people who had affected Mark Twain, inspired his writing, supported his career, or filled his life, there are only Henry and Livy with whom he ever felt truly connected. How much then, would their deaths impact his life?

Henry Clemens was less than two years younger than Twain, and many critics attribute their close bond merely to their proximity in age. With their father's death, their 21-year-old brother Orion became the head of the family, but he had been absent from their home for several years and was never a particularly capable caretaker.

Twain's letter to Henry in August of 1856 outlines his general feelings about the parental capabilities of their older brother: "Although Orion talks grandly about furnishing me with fifty or a hundred dollars a week, I could not depend on him for ten dollars" (Neider, *Letters* 19).

Jane retreated inward and "wept frequently, became absorbed in omens and dreams, took up pipe smoking, accumulated cats and grew deeply absorbed in the color red" (Powers 45). Their older sister Pamela was forced to give up her rounds as a traveling music teacher and stay home to care for their mother. Twain's close relationship with his brother Henry was based only partly on their sibling bonds; Twain also became Henry's surrogate father, caregiver and protector because he believed there was no one else to care for his younger brother.

Even before their father's death, though, Twain held a particularly high opinion of Henry as "the good son" to his own self image as "the bad son." Twain called Henry, "the flower of the family" (Powers 83). Henry was obedient, industrious and studious compared to Twain's mischievous, quick-tempered and adventurous personality. As boys in Hannibal, Henry and Twain shared a room on the second floor of their home. Twain would often ease himself out of the window at night and drop to the top of the woodshed so he could join his waiting friends for nocturnal adventures, but Henry never joined him. In his autobiography, Twain recalled that "the unbroken monotony of Henry's goodness and truthfulness and obedience was a little vexatious," particularly when Henry's sense of duty led him to report Twain's shortcomings to their mother. Twain would eventually incorporate Henry's natural character into his later works: "He is Sid in *Tom Sawyer*. But

Sid was not Henry. Henry was a very much finer and better boy than ever Sid was”
(*Autobiography* 92-93).

Henry eventually joined Twain as a printer’s devil in their brother Orion’s print shop and the two grew ever closer. A few years later, when Twain had established himself as a steamboat cub pilot on the Mississippi river, he encouraged Henry to join him so the two could continue their adventures together and where Twain could keep a protective eye on his younger brother and surrogate son. Twain secured a position for Henry as a mud-clerk¹ on board the *Pennsylvania*, a fast-packet steamship on which Twain was serving under William Brown.² As junior members of the crew, the boys were paid very little, or nothing at all in Henry’s case. Their reward was food, shelter and training, and an opportunity for adventure up and down the Mississippi.

With no money to spend on shore, Twain had become an avid reader of books found either in the boat’s sparse library or those he traded with crew members on other vessels. According to Powers, Twain read, among many others, “Suetonius, Pepys, Malory, Carlyle, Cervantes, Plutarch, Darwin, Macaulay, and Shakespeare, in addition to the Bible” (80). One writer in particular stood out in Twain’s mind, and that was Thomas Paine.

In Paine’s *The Age of Reason*, Twain finally found a logical rebuttal to the often contradictory and confusing sermons of his Calvinistic Presbyterian upbringing. Albert Bigelow Paine, the close friend and first biographer of Twain wrote, “he read it with fear and hesitation, but marveling at its fearlessness and wonderful power” (III:1445). Twain was mesmerized by the prospect that God could be described in terms that defied the limitations placed on him by mankind. Twain had been haunted since his first day of

church by his own sinfulness and guilt, and he was convinced of his own damnation based on a Presbyterian doctrine that he could never live up to. *The Age of Reason* presented Twain with a new concept of religion that both frightened and exhilarated him: “putting aside everything that might excite laughter by its absurdity, or detestation by its profaneness, and confining ourselves merely to an examination of the parts, it is impossible to conceive a story more derogatory to the Almighty, more inconsistent with his wisdom, more contradictory to his power, than [the Bible] story is” (T. Paine).

Thomas Paine offered Twain the possibility of freedom from his guilt over his younger siblings’ deaths, and provided him with the first rational descriptions of the fallacies of Christian dogma. Paine showed Twain that there were other possible explanations for God than those he had been presented by the Presbyterian church. These were radical new ideas for the young man who was, nevertheless, still hesitant about embracing them. A looming tragedy would soon resolve that fear for Twain.

Twain’s overprotective nature toward Henry would eventually set in motion a chain of events that would cost Henry his life and destroy Twain’s childhood perception of God and religion. The pilot of the *Pennsylvania* for whom Twain was working, William Brown, was a foul-tempered and physically abusive man who often took his anger out on the siblings. In *Life on the Mississippi*, Twain describes the events of June, 1858. The captain of the *Pennsylvania* sent Henry to tell Brown that the boat would make an unscheduled stop at an upcoming plantation to take on cargo. Henry passed on the information to Brown who either didn’t hear him or ignored him. When Brown continued past the designated point, the captain rushed to the pilothouse to order Brown to bring the boat about and asked why the pilot had ignored the order. Brown accused Henry of

failing to deliver the message, but Twain was quick to defend his younger brother in front of the captain, much to the detriment of his own relationship with Brown. A short while later, Henry entered the pilothouse unaware of the trouble, and Brown attacked him. Rather than allow young Henry to take care of himself, Twain's overprotective nature got the better of him, and he intervened with a heavy stool to Brown's head. Rather than have him arrested in New Orleans, however, the captain of the *Pennsylvania* encouraged Twain to "lay for" Brown on shore and "give him a good sound thrashing, do you hear? I'll pay the expenses" (Twain, *Life* 137).

Though he was safe from prosecution, it was clear Twain could no longer serve under Brown on the steamboat. The captain found Twain a job on another boat, the *A.T. Lacey*, but not one for Henry. Henry chose to stay on the *Pennsylvania* for its return trip upriver. Henry's boat left two days before Twain's. It would never make it as far as Memphis. The *Pennsylvania* succumbed to a fairly common tragedy for steam-powered vessels, a boiler explosion.³ Unfortunately, among the *Pennsylvania*'s cargo from New Orleans was a considerable shipment of turpentine stored in barrels in the hold. "It was one of the worst explosions in the history of steamboating" (Powers 87).

Henry had been asleep in a hold above the boilers. The explosion propelled him upward through the main deck of the boat on a jet of hot steam. Rather than falling into the river, however, he apparently fell back into the wreckage and onto the destroyed boilers. Henry, still conscious though badly burned and broken, managed to pull himself overboard where a rescue barge pulled him out of the river. It took more than twenty-four hours for the burned victims of the explosion to reach a hospital in Memphis. Henry was

originally listed in the Memphis paper as unharmed, but was later listed as “hurt beyond help” (Powers 88).

Twain heard about the explosion more than a hundred miles downriver. The fear for his brother and ward was overwhelming. He arrived at the hospital the day after Henry had got there, and his grief upon seeing Henry was so immense that a local newspaper reporter felt compelled to write about it:

We witnessed one of the most affecting scenes at the exchange yesterday that has ever been seen. The brother of Mr. Henry Clemens, second clerk of the *Pennsylvania*, arrived in the city yesterday afternoon. He hurried to the exchange to see his brother and upon approaching the bedside of the wounded man, his feeling so much overcame him, at the scalded and emaciated form before him that he sunk to the floor overpowered. There was scarcely a dry eye in the house; the poor sufferers shed tears at the sight (*MTL* 1:82).

It is clear that Twain felt an overwhelming sense of guilt and despair at the sight of Henry lying in the hospital bed. It would prove to be a life-changing event that would forever alter Twain’s religious worldview. Three days later, Twain wrote a letter to their sister Mollie:

Long before this reaches you, my poor Henry – my darling, my pride, my glory, my all, will have finished his blameless career, and the light of my life will have gone out in utter darkness. Oh God, this is hard to bear. Hardened, hopeless, aye, lost – lost – lost and ruined sinner as I am – I, even I, have humbled myself to the ground and prayed as never man prayed before, that the Great God might let this cup pass from me and spare my brother – that he would pour out the fullness of his just wrath upon my wicked head, but have mercy, mercy, mercy, upon that unoffending boy. For forty-eight hours I labored at the bedside of my poor burned and bruised, but uncomplaining brother, and then the star of my hope went out and left me in the gloom of despair. Then poor wretched me, that was once so proud, was humbled to the very dust – lower than the dust – for the vilest beggar in the streets of Saint Louis could never conceive a humiliation like mine. Men take me by the hand and congratulate me, and call me lucky! My God forgive them, for they know not what they say (*MTL* 1:81).

Henry's death would create both a moral crisis for Twain and also close the door for him on the value of man's religion. Prior to the accident, Twain had contemplated (in letters to his brother Orion) the possibilities of joining the ministry. It was a fantasy that they both had shared. After Henry's death, however, that fantasy would turn into a lifelong quest to undermine the image of God sold in the Bible and Sunday schools across the nation.

The letter to Mollie contains a number of significant clues about Twain's state of mind relative to God and religion at the time he wrote it. The rawness and authenticity of his voice in a state of such abject grief are apparent. It is a letter written directly from his heart, without the usual glibness or creative flourishes common of so many of his other letters. No better document exists for establishing his position on God at that moment.

The first sentence reinforces Twain's image of Henry as his surrogate son, as well as the savior of Twain's own sinful ways. Twain describes him as "my pride, my glory, my all," and "the light of my life." These are not descriptive adjectives of a mere sibling, regardless of how close the family bond may be. These are the adjectives of a loving, devoted parent who sees their own immortality in the hope of a child. For Twain though, Henry did not represent the prospect of eternal life; Henry represented the prospect of eternal salvation. Twain wrote a bit further down, "that [God] would pour out the fullness of his just wrath on my wicked head but have mercy, mercy, mercy on that unoffending boy." Twain imagined himself a sinner doomed to the fire and brimstone of a Presbyterian Hell, but the virtuous boy he was raising and protecting could redeem him, so long as he kept Henry both good and safe.

This letter to Mollie illustrates the first key transitional moment in Twain's life that would most affect his relationship with religion and God. In Twain's heart, Henry's death condemned him beyond the possibility of redemption as defined by his strict religious upbringing: "Hardened, hopeless, aye, lost – lost – lost and ruined sinner as I am." In the same sentence, separated only by a hyphen, Twain shows us that his transition away from religion had already begun, likely from his interaction with Thomas Paine's work: "I, *even I*, have humbled myself to the ground" (emphasis mine).

The remainder of the letter appears at first reading to be a rather conventional, and, for the time-period, appropriately Biblical outpouring of grief. Closer inspection, however, reveals that a remarkable internal struggle is occurring for Twain's religious loyalties. In the letter, Henry's death is acknowledged, but "the tone is florid, rhetorical, and rather detached in its literary allusiveness" (Robinson 169). Indeed, his brother is hardly mentioned in this letter outside of the first sentence, and what follows is not the celebration of Henry's personal qualities combined with Twain's sense of inestimable personal loss, but rather focuses almost exclusively on Twain's personal depravity and guilt. "Henry's death is important primarily because of its consequences for the surviving brother" (Robinson 170). Twain appears incapable of resolving his burden of guilt over the thought that the disaster and Henry's death were somehow his personal responsibility. The guilt is so overwhelming that even a simple letter informing the family of their loss is filled with his personal religious struggle.

This quality of Twain's was endemic to his personality as noted by a number of biographers, friends and family. In his daughter's biography, Clara Clemens noted of her father "if on any occasion he could manage to trace the cause of someone's mishap to

something he himself had done or said, no one could persuade him he was mistaken. Self-condemnation was the natural turn for his mind to take, yet often he accused himself of having inflicted pain or trouble when the true cause was far removed from himself' (Clemens 6-7). Samuel Charles Webster, the son of Twain's close friend Daniel, observed in his work on Twain, that "Mark Twain never forgave anyone he had injured" (Webster viii).

With this insight into his natural tendencies, it becomes relatively easy to examine how Twain's letter so accurately reflects his own internal battle between the God-fearing Presbyterian and the egocentric pragmatist of theological reason. As he would do throughout his writing career, Twain uses Biblical references in the letter simultaneously in both original context and as critical metaphoric messages to express this internal dichotomy. "That the Great God might let this cup pass from me and spare my brother" is clearly a reference to Mathew 26:39: "And He went a little beyond them, and fell on His face and prayed, saying, 'My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; yet not as I will, but as You will'" (Mathew 26:39). The reference here is important for examining Twain's use, or rather, misuse of it.

In the letter, Twain is clearly implying that he desires to take the place of Henry, imploring the Presbyterian God of his youth to take His wrath out "upon my wicked head" and "spare my brother." However, the Biblical reference is to the moment in the Garden when Jesus is asking God to spare him from the cross so that he might avoid the ordeal of crucifixion to save mankind. The reference is apparently contradictory.

At first, this seems like merely a misuse of the passage on the part of Twain that might occur in anyone trying to draft a letter in a state of grief. However, virtually every

biographer and historian of Mark Twain agrees that he had an encyclopedic knowledge of the Bible. Why then would he misuse such a well-known quote here? If we examine it in the light of Twain's tendency toward self-condemnation and his internal struggle, it makes more sense. Even prior to the accident, the Presbyterian Twain was already convinced of his damnation, and the guilt of losing his only personal salvation due to his own perceived fault was a "cup" he could not bear. Twain is not imploring God to trade his life for Henry's, but to relieve him of the incredible guilt that he could no longer bear in exchange for God's "wrath upon my wicked head." Twain would rather suffer His wrath than carry his guilt. At the same time, Twain is also transitioning away from that religious upbringing, and the contradictory nature of the misused quote demonstrates an apparent Freudian slip in his intentions to give up religion, as embodied in one of the prime symbols of the Christian faith, the cup, should his Presbyterian God fail to "have mercy upon that unoffending boy."

The eminence of Henry's demise leaves Twain "in the gloom of despair." The following line is also a Biblical allusion that provides some interesting insight. "Then poor wretched me, that was once so proud, was humbled to the very dust – lower than the dust – for the vilest beggar in the streets of Saint Louis could never conceive a humiliation like mine." It is reminiscent of Lamentations 1:12, "Behold, and see if there be any sorrow like unto my sorrow, which is done unto me, wherewith the Lord hath afflicted me in the day of his fierce anger." Twain's sorrow is again dichotomous. He has sorrow for the loss of his brother at the same time as having sorrow for the loss of his religion. The key to this analysis is, again, how much of the letter is egocentrically focused on Twain and his guilt, and how little is focused on Henry.

Finally, the concluding appeal, “My God forgive them, for they know not what they say,” is an obvious reference to Jesus’ prayer at the crucifixion: “Then said Jesus, Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34). The glaring difference, of course, is the honorific. Twain ends this letter by using one of the most famous New Testament quotes that illustrates Jesus’ sense of self-sacrifice for the salvation of mankind, even those who crucify him. Twain sees the men who are congratulating him on his personal luck as driving the metaphoric nails for his own crucifixion on the cross of his Presbyterian religion. By altering the honorific from “Father” to “My God,” he is demonstrating his final transition from Presbyterian Calvinism: he appeals to “My God” to forgive the men who know not what they say when they bless his “good fortune.” For Twain, his fortune is anything but good.

Had Mark Twain never been exposed to Paine’s idea of a rational religion in *The Age of Reason*, he might have had fewer internal conflicts and less guilt over his own religious doubts when Henry died. More than likely, however, Paine’s work merely proved to be the polemic that introduced him to the dialectic of reason versus the rhetoric of religion. His exposure to Paine just prior to the catastrophic event that destroyed his last great hope of salvation was, perhaps, the most significant influence in launching Twain’s lifelong theological debate with himself and his readers: Paine gave him the idea, but Henry gave him the proof, that the true God of nature and reason has absolutely no interest in the fate of the individual.

The Bad Little Boy

Mark Twain would eventually write: “Faith is believing what you know ain’t so” (*Pudd’nhead Wilson* 110). He would spend the remainder of his life struggling with internal issues over religion. He was a man divided by a deep-seated need for faith ingrained in his conscience since childhood and encouraged by his devout wife, Livy, and a healthy skepticism bounded in logic and reason.

Armed as he was with an extraordinarily sharp mind and an indomitable wit, Twain’s explorations of his issues with religion would infiltrate his writing from the first book to the last in ways that would amuse, offend and challenge his audiences. Furthermore, this internal dichotomy, grounded as it was in the tragedy of Henry’s death, would show up continually as part of Henry’s story retold in more than a dozen books, short stories and essays, often altered, but still there.

In Twain’s first published book, *The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County and Other Sketches*, published nine years after the death of Henry, we see one of the first examples of Twain’s process of dealing with his brother’s story and its affect on Twain’s religious explorations.

In “The Story of the Bad Little Boy Who Didn’t Come to Grief,” Twain is clearly still struggling with his tendency toward self-condemnation and a sense of moral inferiority related to his younger brother. At the same time, we can begin to see Twain’s sense of wit and cynicism aimed at the culture of religious education.

The story lampoons the common Sunday school reader and its moral message that all bad little boys are doomed to one type or another of instant karmic punishment for their misdeeds in life. It describes a “bad little boy” named Jim who did not fit into the standard mold of those young boys described in the reader, though as Twain writes in the

opening sentence, “Once there was a bad little boy, whose name was Jim – though, if you will notice, you will find that bad little boys are nearly always called James in your Sunday-school books. It was very strange, but still it was true, that this one was called Jim” (*ETS* 83).

Twain carefully outlines how this typical bad little boy lacked the standard trappings of the Sunday school lesson. He was not led astray by bad influences and had no secret guilt from which he sought relief. He didn’t have a sick parent on whose deathbed promise the young man would repent, and his parents were not loving, doting parents praying to God to save their wayward son. He was simply a bad little boy whose own mother said “‘if he were to break his neck, it wouldn't be much loss.’ She always spanked Jim to sleep, and she never kissed him goodnight; on the contrary, she boxed his ears when she was ready to leave him” (*ETS* 83).

There are essays by the likes of Forrest Robinson, Micheal Kiskis and Shelley Fishkin that examine Twain’s relationship with his own mother and the idea that, in competition with the good boy Henry, he sought constant approval from her that she gave instead to the younger son. This story provides a fine example of that aspect in Twain’s writing. However, it is the self-comparison with Henry and the critique of religious doctrine that is the overriding theme of this short work.

The bad little boy in this story never suffers the fate of all the bad little boys in the Sunday school lessons. He mischievously eats all the jam and replaces it with tar, steals apples from a farmer, boats on Sundays, beats his little sister and mistreats animals, all without suffering the consequences that always befall such bad little boys in church. Twain himself always carried the guilt of his sinful ways, even when he stopped

believing in divine retribution. For a time, then, Paine's God became Twain's God, a divinity evident in all of nature and whose consciousness spanned the cosmos with no time or interest in the individual who steals his teacher's penknife: "Every thing about this boy was curious – every thing turned out differently with him from the way it does to the bad Jameses in the books" (*ETS* 83).

Most of Twain's main characters were pseudo-autobiographical images. As Blake Allmendinger points out, "for years [Twain] focused on the failure to save his brother's life, and on the guilt which consumed him as a result of his inability to prevent the accident. He transferred that guilt, not only into fiction, but also into the autobiographical reconstructions of his life through that fiction" (Allmendinger 15).

In this story, Twain is the bad little boy who never receives his punishment. Furthermore, Twain incorporates the image of his brother into the story in the form of poor George Wilson, the "moral boy, the good little boy of the village, who always obeyed his mother, and never told an untruth, and was fond of his lessons and infatuated with Sunday-school" (*ETS* 84). In the story, the bad little boy steals the teacher's penknife and then, fearing a whipping, drops it into the folds of George's cap. When the penknife is discovered, it is the good boy, George, who receives the whipping and the bad little boy escapes harm completely. This element of the good boy suffering penance while the bad boy escapes harm is allegorical of Henry's death with the "wicked head" of Twain being congratulated by those around him for his good fortune: "And when the grieved teacher charged the theft upon him, and was just in the very act of bringing the switch down upon his trembling shoulders, a white-haired improbable justice of the peace did not suddenly appear in their midst and strike an attitude and say, "spare this noble

boy – there stands the cowering culprit!” (*ETS* 84). Here, for Twain, is the Presbyterian God’s failure to save Henry illustrated in Twain’s writing, just like in Memphis nine years before. This further serves to support Twain’s theological notion that the true God does not care about the individual.

There is one other interesting line in this short work that should be highlighted with respect to Twain’s relationship with his brother’s ghost. He points out in the penknife incident that “the model boy George got threshed, and Jim was glad of it; because, you know, Jim hated moral boys” (*ETS* 85). Here we see one of Twain’s varied emotional reactions to Henry’s death that he would explore in other works in an attempt to resolve his own guilt. Twain shows anger toward Henry, both for being the good, moral boy compared to himself, and also for taking the punishment that Twain felt he himself deserved. As Forrest Robinson postulates, “Perhaps it is the surfacing of unconscious self-vindication. [Twain] hated him, but [he] had good cause; Henry’s self-righteousness and moral gamesmanship made [his] hostility inevitable” (Robinson 172).

Finally, the ending of the story once again comes around to Twain’s egocentricity and self-recrimination as he describes the bad little boy in terms that mirror his own survivor’s guilt: “And he grew up, and married, and raised a large family, and brained them all with an ax one night, and got wealthy by all manner of cheating and rascality, and now he is the infernalesst wickedest scoundrel in his native village, and is universally respected” (*ETS* 85).

The Good Little Boy

“The Story of the Good Little Boy Who Did Not Prosper” was created about the same time as “The Story of the Bad Little Boy Who Didn’t Come to Grief,” but wasn’t published until five years later. From the title alone it is obviously a companion story to the original, but its quality of story telling and the clarity of its satire is not quite as strong. Perhaps that’s why Twain chose not to include it in the *Jumping Frog* collection originally. However, in 1870, Twain’s lecture income and brisk sales of *Innocents Abroad* were making him quite wealthy. That, coupled with his February marriage to Olivia Langdon meant he was not taking his contractual obligation to the *Galaxy* magazine as seriously as he might otherwise. Twain was contracted to provide a short piece for the *Galaxy* each month, and he regularly turned to his old notebooks and partially completed stories to fulfill the contract. This made for a rocky relationship with the magazine’s editors, but it also brought to light some of Twain’s writings that might otherwise have never been published. More importantly, it provides scholars additional insight into Twain’s early evolution as a writer.

“The Story of the Good Little Boy” shows Twain’s continued development of his satirical voice about religion. It also shows that this voice, at least at the beginning of Twain’s career, was based solidly on his relationship with Henry and, as in many of Twain’s early essays and stories full of religious satire, he finds a way to conjure Henry’s ghost as the ideal model of a good boy in an attempt to relieve some of his lingering anxiety over criticizing the ingrained religion of his youth.

In “The Story of the Good Little Boy,” Twain describes a youth named Jacob who accepts the lessons of his Sunday-school reader as indisputable truth, a clear satirical jibe at Christians who argue inerrancy in the Bible: “This good little boy read all the Sunday-

school books; they were his greatest delight. This was the whole secret of it. He believed in the good little boys they put in the Sunday-school books; he had every confidence in them” (CSS 67). Twain’s character Jacob wanted more than anything to be good enough to be written about in such a reader, but the only drawback, according to Twain, was that the good little boys in the Sunday-school books always died in the last chapter: “That was the ambition of young Jacob Blivens. He wished to be put in a Sunday-school book. It made him feel a little uncomfortable sometimes when he reflected that the good little boys always died” (CSS 67). The comparison in this story to Henry, along with Twain’s enduring image of his younger brother, is obvious. It may also be a reason why Twain held the story back from publication until he had more distance from the tragedy, but that can only be conjecture. What is clear is how parallel are the life stories of the fictional Jacob and the real Henry, including the manner of their deaths. When the good boy Jacob catches some bad boys tying old nitroglycerine cans to the tails of stray dogs, Jacob intervenes to save the animals. However, an old man enters the scene just in time to mistake Jacob for the bad boy and: “He took Jacob Blivens by the ear and turned him around, and hit him a whack in the rear with the flat of his hand; and in an instant that good little boy shot out through the roof and soared away towards the sun, with the fragments of those fifteen dogs stringing after him like the tail of a kite...and the bulk of him came down all right in a tree-top in an adjoining county; the rest of him was apportioned around among four townships. You never saw a boy scattered so. Every boy who ever did as he did prospered except him. His case is truly remarkable. It will probably never be accounted for.” (CSS 70).

This comparison between Jacob and Henry also served as a convenient expurgation for Twain's self-inflicted guilt. He was searching for justification for his survival and Henry's death, and like many writers, his craft offered him the best therapy. Twain was the bad little boy who prospered while Henry was the good little boy who died. It was the kind of injustice that defied the Calvinistic Presbyterian righteousness of his Sunday-school lessons, but intrinsically supported a deistic God who created the world but has since remained indifferent to it. Such logic began to free Twain of his lingering asceticism and provided him some absolution to embrace his darker personality. As Twain points out with some irony: "He loved to live, you know, and this was the most unpleasant feature about being a Sunday-schoolbook boy. He knew it was not healthy to be good" (CSS 68).

Advice for Good Little Boys and Girls

Twain would become increasingly forthright in pointing out the absurdity of such Sunday-school fiction in the two short sketches he wrote for *The San Francisco Youth's Companion*. Although they were published in a magazine designed for young people, both "Advice" articles were aimed at adults who could appreciate Twain's new style of wry ecumenical skepticism. "Advice for Good Little Boys," for example, claims that "Good little boys must never tell lies when the truth will answer just as well" (ETS II:242).

In this story, Twain still manages to honor his younger sibling by pointing out that children "should never do anything wicked and then lay it on your brother, when it is just as convenient to lay it on another boy" (ETS II:242). Of course, he has equally good

advice for relating to other siblings: “You ought never to knock your little sisters down with a club. It is better to use a cat, which is soft. In doing this you must be careful to take the cat by the tail in such a manner that she cannot scratch you” (ETS II:242).

“Advice for Good Little Girls” continues in a similar vein, warning that “you ought never to ‘sass’ old people – unless they ‘sass’ you first” and “you ought to respect your parents’ little prejudices and humor their little whims and put up with their little foibles, until they get to crowding you too much” (ETS II:245). However, it is the sophisticated language and satirical allusion to unquestioning faith in this piece that makes quite clear the adult audience to whom Twain intended the message: “You ought never to take your little brother’s ‘chewing-gum’ away from him by main force; it is better to rope him in with the promise of the first two dollars and a half you find floating down the river on a grindstone. In the artless simplicity natural to his time of life, he will regard it as a perfectly fair transaction. In all ages of the world, this eminently plausible fiction has lured the obtuse infant to financial ruin and disaster” (ETS II:244). The last sentence of the passage is humorous, but is also a clever jab at those who donate part of their income to religious institutions. As he would remark in a letter to his sister, Mollie, “Religion and poverty cannot go together” (MTL 341).

Ridiculing the human religious dogma and its teaching of an inerrant Bible was only part of Twain’s developing method for promoting his particular brand of Deism. Twain reserved an equal, if not greater, dose of ridicule for those that believed in Christianity. During his stay in New York at the beginning of 1867, while waiting for the *Quaker City* to depart for the Holy Land, Twain continued to sharpen his pen on the bromidically pious. In two substantial segments of the *Alta* letters, most of which would

later be transformed into his book *The Innocents Abroad*, Twain devoted his attention to an Apocryphal New Testament that he claimed to have run across that covers Christ's previously unknown childhood. While it is possible Twain had seen one of the original 1621 King James Apocryphal texts in the New York Library, it is clear from the "translation" he reports to his readers that the creation is his own. Taking up the early life of Jesus, Twain derides those believers who accept the inerrancy of scripture:

Chapter 15. Jesus and the other boys play together and make clay figures of animals. Jesus causes them to walk; also makes clay birds that he causes to fly, and eat and drink. The children's parents are alarmed and take Jesus for a sorcerer, and order them to seek better company.

Chapter 19. Jesus charged with throwing a boy from the roof of a house, miraculously causes the dead boy to speak and acquit him. Sent to a schoolmaster, refuses to tell his letters and the schoolmaster going to whip him, his hand withers and he dies. Kills a boy, cases blindness to fall upon his accusers, for which Joseph pulls him by the ear.

Chapter 19:16. Then said Joseph unto Mary, henceforth we will not allow him to go out of the house, for every one who displeases him is killed.

Twain ends the letter with his observation that the young Jesus' "society was pleasant, but attended by serious drawbacks" (TMB 252-253).

It was becoming clear to Twain by that time that his increasing skill at skewering the religious faithful in his letters was earning him a popularity he hadn't quite expected. Rather than public outrage at his 'blasphemy,' Twain was experiencing widespread public acclaim. In fact, the famous political cartoonist Thomas Nast, then in the early days of his great popularity, proposed a joint tour in which Twain would lecture while Nast illustrated the remarks with lightning caricatures. However, Twain had already agreed to travel to the Holy Land on the *Quaker City* for the *Alta*, and the time was too short.

With this newfound success finally came the confidence Twain needed to begin shedding the spectre of his younger brother as he sought to question the nature of human religion in his writing. Though Twain would never completely be rid his personal condemnation about Henry's death, he would eventually alter his own memory of the events in *Life on the Mississippi* published in 1883 in a way that would allow him to release the worst of his guilt over the incident. In that recollection of Henry's death, Henry is not mortally wounded in the explosion, but rather has the strength to swim back to the boat and rescue other passengers. Later, Henry is on his way to recovery in a hospital when an incompetent doctor gives him an overdose of morphine, killing him. By falsely placing the real cause of Henry's death on an errant medical accident, Twain tries to convince himself that Henry's death was not his fault. The reality, of course, is that it never was, but Twain needed to distance himself a bit further from the cause of Henry's death if he were ever going to ease his guilt over the incident. Nevertheless, Henry's character would continue to resurface throughout Twain's career in such works as *Huckleberry Finn*, *Those Extraordinary Twins* and *Pudd'n head Wilson* whenever he needed a youthful, moral purist to counterbalance questionable morality of his mischievous main characters. }

The confidence Twain discovered from his new popularity and the increasing demand for his lectures would lead him directly to the next phase of his career where he would purposefully seek to utilize his growing disillusion with the claims of mainstream Christianity as the basis for generating literary income. With the decision to join the *Quaker City* cruise, he planned to amass material for a full-length book that would capitalize on his new skills in ridiculing religious pomposity. This can be determined in

part by comparing his final letter from New York to the *Alta*, with a letter he wrote about the same time to his mother.

The *Alta* letter includes a description of a “sanctimonious old iceberg” who questioned the captain if the excursion would come to a halt on Sundays. “Captain Duncan replied that he hardly expected to anchor the ship in the middle of the Atlantic,” but on shore it would be left to the passengers to decide. “The questioner did not groan audibly, but I think he did inwardly. Then he said it would be well for people to calculate their chances before doing wrong; that he had always got into trouble when he traveled on the Sabbath, and that he should do so no more when he could avoid it.” Twain followed up that report with the commentary to his readers that he “respected that man’s repugnance to violating the Sabbath until he betrayed that would violate it in a minute if he were not afraid the lightning would strike him, and then I lost my reverence for him” (TMB 176-77).

This almost patent criticism of false religious piety is belied by the personal letter to Jane Clemens in which he writes “I have a splendid, immoral, tobacco-smoking, wine drinking, godless roommate who is as good and true and right-minded a man as ever lived” (MTL II:50). He would emphasize his disrespect for the sanctimony of his fellow passengers on the evening prior to departure by getting roaring drunk, arrested and thrown into jail for the night.

The 58 letters that Twain would eventually dispatch during the course of his trip to the Holy Land contain numerous skeptical observations on religion, religious sites and supposed relics of Christian history. Those same letters would be dramatically revised to remove much of their abject criticism and harsh language when they would become the

basis for *The Innocents Abroad*. What happens to Twain in the period between his trip to the Holy Land and the publishing of that book can be explained by the introduction of Olivia Langdon into his life. Her presence would dramatically alter Twain's initial forward advance on the pillars of Christianity and, in return, likely salvage Mark Twain's writing career and his place in American literary history.

CHAPTER II

LIVY

What, sir, would the people of the earth be without woman? They would be scarce, sir, almighty scarce. – Speech, January 11, 1868

Much has been written about Olivia Langdon Clemens (Livy) and her influence on the writings of Mark Twain. Most critics agree that Livy was a calming influence on Twain's hyperbolic personality, but few recognize how that same calming influence kept Twain's fiction within the realm of widespread public acceptability, albeit with a healthy dose of dogmatic skepticism and religious criticism. Other critics look on Livy's influence more harshly. Jeffrey Steinbrink refers to the "repression [Twain] experienced at the hands of his wife" (300). Bradford Smith describes Livy as "a rich girl" who Twain "tried to settle down with and she stifled him" (429). Ron Powers, the modern biographer of Twain, reserves his most vehement criticism for Livy, calling her "ruthlessly domesticating," and one figure in a "three-headed hellhag who leeches the writer's precious raw Western genius, turning him into a literary girlie-man" (219).¹

Though it is clear Livy's influence toned down the rhetoric of *Innocents Abroad* compared to the original *Alta* letters, there doesn't seem to be any evidence in Mark Twain's notebooks or other writings to indicate he was anything but grateful for her presence in his life. Indeed, there is ample evidence to the contrary. Twain saw

Livy as both a loving partner and an intellectual equal. As Twain himself describes her in the “Chapters from My Autobiography,” published in the *North American Review* in 1906:

“Under a grave and gentle exterior burned inextinguishable fires of sympathy, energy, devotion, enthusiasm, and absolutely limitless affection. She was always frail in body, and she lived upon her spirit, whose hopefulness and courage were indestructible. Perfect truth, perfect honesty, perfect candor, were qualities of her character which were born with her... I have compared and contrasted her with hundreds of persons, and my conviction remains that hers was the most perfect character I have ever met... Her character and disposition were of the sort that not only invites worship but commands it... It was a strange combination which wrought into one individual, so to speak, by marriage – her disposition and character and mine” (CFMA 578).

It is the last line that best illustrates Twain’s relationship with Livy. For him, they were of a single mind, perfectly suited for one another, and she offered him the moral balance he had lost with the death of Henry. He relied upon her guidance not only as a mother and wife, but also as a friend and confidant. Livy would become a kind of moral and spiritual anchor for Twain that kept his writing and lectures grounded in a commercially viable rhetoric. Twain once said of her, “she not only edited my works, she edited me” (Phipps xiii). This may be where some of the criticism for Livy’s influence originates. While it is possible that Mark Twain as an unfettered wildcat writer may have produced even greater literature, the reality is that the hard drinking, womanizing, religiously critical writer may never have survived or produced the kind of outstanding American literature for which he would eventually become known without Livy’s steady hand steering him through the troubled waters of his own dark conscience.

The Innocents Abroad

The Innocents Abroad offers an excellent example of how Twain's writing was affected by his relationship with Livy. The blatantly irreverent tone of the *Alta* letters in reference to religious sites and tourist attractions in the Holy Land would generate considerable controversy among his readers in California. Traveling to San Francisco in the Spring of 1868 to prevent the *Alta California* from bringing the original letters out in book form, Twain laments the accusations being hurled against him: "What did I ever write about the Holy Land that was so peculiarly lacerating? The most straight-laced of the preachers here cannot well get through a sermon without turning aside to give me a blast. The last remark reported to me from the pulpit is 'this son of the Devil, Mark Twain!' ... They have complained of nothing save the rudeness and coarseness of the Holy Land letters" (MTL II:220). However, Twain may also be protesting a bit much. Such observations in the *Alta* letters as "Poor Lot's wife is gone – I never think of her without feeling sad. The cattle must have got her" is the sort of commentary that would draw the ire of most devout Christians and Twain knew it (*TIA* 585).

What had become important to Twain by this point was editing the *Alta* letters into a book length format that would win him favor with Livy and her parents while still managing to criticize Christian piety and the behavior of his fellow travelers. One of those travelers had been Charles Langdon, a youth from Elmira, New York whose parents had paid for his passage on the *Quaker City* in hopes the pilgrimage to the Holy Land would cure the young man of his adventuresome tendencies. They had not counted on Mark Twain's character undermining their efforts. Langdon had a small ivory miniature of his sister Olivia, and he showed it to Twain one night during the voyage.

“Mark Twain told his biographer Albert Bigelow Paine that he regarded the image as ‘something more than a mere human likeness’” (Powers 213). Twain would ask Langdon to introduce him to Olivia, which Langdon did shortly after their return. Twain fell instantly in love with the slight, beautiful young woman and set out to win her hand, even if it meant changing his ways and embracing Christianity. Though the effort would inevitably fail, the process would significantly alter, and perhaps improve, Twain’s exploration of religion.

Although Olivia and her family were not puritanical, “they were pious Congregationalists who took their religion quite seriously” (Steinbrink 7). It was made quite clear to Twain that any hope he had of winning the favor of Livy’s parents lay in his ability to demonstrate his strong moral character. This was no easy task considering his reputation among the passengers of the *Quaker City*, some of whom were acquainted with the Langdons; the review of his *Alta* letters in California newspapers that had begun filtering to the East Coast; and his somewhat dubious reputation as a hard drinking gold and silver wildcatter during his days in the Nevada territory. Twain attempted to rescue his image by requesting letters of recommendation from old friends in the west. The testimonials that Livy’s parents received in return failed to have their intended affect. They included admonitions that Twain was a “scoundrel who would likely fill a drunkard’s grave,” that he was “born to be hung,” and a declaration that “I would rather bury a daughter of mine than have her marry such a fellow” (Powers 261). It would take nearly two years for Twain to overcome these setbacks and finally win Livy’s hand, and that effort would require an additional trip through the Holy Land, this time on paper with Livy as his tour guide.

Beginning shortly after their courtship started, Twain and Livy would engage regularly in discussions of philosophy, science, history and literature. Livy was academically trained in these subjects and their discussions and correspondences on Tennyson, Milton, Browning, Shakespeare, Swift, Sterne, Hugo, Holmes and others helped Twain develop many of his literary writing skills. In the winter of 1869, Twain labored heavily with the manuscript of *The Innocents Abroad* and regularly sought Livy's assistance with passages. The overall effect of her influence was to dilute his more radical attacks on Christian myths and beliefs by injecting a romantic perspective on the historical landscape of the Holy Land. In the original description of the Sea of Galilee, for example, Twain calls it "excessively plain, no more to be compared to Tahoe than a meridian of longitude is to a rainbow" (*TIA* 507). Twain goes on to describe the sea – the same place where Jesus walked on water – as full of solitude, "but the sort of solitude to make one dreary...where the swine of the miracle ran down into the sea, and doubtless thought it was better to swallow a devil or two and get drowned into the bargain than have to live longer in such a place" (*TIA* 508).²

The religiously critical-minded Twain would likely have let his satire and criticism stand on its own as he did for much of the *Alta* letters. Livy, however, helped Twain find a way to combine his personally acerbic style of Higher Criticism with a new respect for the historical beauty and underlying ideal of the Christian faith. Thus, the same chapter that denounces the Sea of Galilee as "an unobtrusive basin of water" that is "a scene of desolation and misery," ends with a beautifully rendered specimen of Victorian romanticism:

In the starlight, Gahlee has no boundaries but the broad compass of the heavens, and is a theatre meet for great events; meet for the birth of a religion able to save a world; and meet for the stately Figure appointed to stand upon its stage and proclaim its high decrees. But in the sunlight, one says: Is it for the deeds which were done and the words which were spoken in this little acre of rocks and sand eighteen centuries gone, that the bells are ringing today in the remote islands of the sea and far and wide over continents that clasp the circumference of the huge globe? One can comprehend it only when night has hidden all incongruities and created a theatre proper for so grand a drama. (*TIA* 513).

As Peter Messent points out, this technique of criticizing religious doctrine and Biblical history and then softening the criticism with romantic idealism “makes the Christian connotations an aesthetic, not a rational, consideration” (376). This new method resolved a crucial problem for Twain. By separating Christian practice from Christian history, Twain was able to treat Christianity and its followers with an indulgent tone that sent a surface message of reverence while reserving in its undermining implications a disdain for anything beyond the reach of rationality.

Although Twain may not have realized it fully at the time, Livy’s influence in helping Twain revise *The Innocents Abroad* by including romantic idealism to blunt his acerbic rationalism is a technique that would become one of Twain’s enduring literary trademarks. He would adopt it quite effectively for many of his most famous works, including *Tom Sawyer*, *Huckleberry Finn*, *Connecticut Yankee* and *Joan of Arc*.

The Innocents Abroad was finally published in August 1869, and Twain’s effort to combine humor, satire and serious literature into a work that would launch his literary career was successful beyond even his own optimistic expectations. In its first 18 months, the book sold more than 82,000 copies at roughly four dollars each. Twain’s royalty was more than \$16,000 (Powers 277). More importantly, Twain had managed to produce a

book that, according to many reviewers, was “pure in its morals,” and “aglow with that cheerful, hopeful, wholesome religion which does not fear to be humorous” (Powers 277). Twain had hit his mark.

In the course of editing his letters to fit a more acceptable and refined Christianity, predicated in part upon his desire not to alienate Livy or her parents, Twain by necessity was also forced to examine his own religious ideology. This is another area where Livy’s influence was germane to Twain’s ongoing religious development. He altered the letters in part to satisfy her and her parents’ expectations of him as a strong Christian believer, yet he nevertheless kept intact “his eye for the hypocrisies and occasional nonsense of the established Christian churches” (Wilson 156). Twain was also able to weigh the evidence of Christian claims in light of his first-hand impressions of the Holy Land and refine his personal beliefs accordingly.

During the period from his first visit at the Langdon household in September 1868 until his marriage to Livy in February 1870, Twain would actively seek to reinvent himself as a faithful Christian believer in his attempts to win approval of both her and her parents. In the course of those 17 months, he penned more than 160 love letters to Livy full of promised conversion and unerring faith. His impassioned affirmations to her that “I believe in you, even as I believe in the Savior,” that “I have been praying that I might seek the Savior for his own sake...not to secure your loving approbation,” and that he and his close friend The Reverend Joseph Twichell “prayed fervently for my conversion, and that your love and mine might grow until it was made perfect love by the approving spirit of God,” all served to defuse Livy’s doubts about his spiritual sincerity and render all the

more credible his declaration that he was, finally, a “believer” (*MTL* II: 289, 312, 319, 370).³

This is not to say that Twain ever practiced any kind of deception on Livy, but rather that in the process of convincing her of his newfound spiritual connection he actually convinced himself. Shortly after he asked her to marry him in late 1868, Twain described himself in a letter to Livy as a “returning sinner” who was giving up his wandering and wastrel ways in exchange for “the highest Christian excellence” (*LL* 59, 60). In a letter to Twichell a few months later he wrote that he “meant to lead a useful, unostentatious and earnest religious life,” and that he “would unite with the church” as soon as he was settled (*Messent* 379). Additionally, Twain would report to his friend Will Bowen that “he looked to rise to Livy’s level – to adopt a more conventional, self-consciously Christian way of life” (*Messent* 375). The conversion, however, didn’t last long, but it would be a mistake to accuse Twain of subterfuge. Ron Powers sums it up best: “These remarks suggest that Twain was struggling to recapture the Christian faith that had deserted him with the death of Henry; he was not merely trying to fool Livy. Fraudulence was never a part of Twain’s makeup. Self-deception perhaps was a different matter” (262).

For nearly two years following their marriage, Twain attempted valiantly to adopt Livy’s institutionalized regimen of regular Christian observance by asking for blessings at meals, reading a Bible chapter every morning, and attending Sunday church regularly (*MTB* II:411). However, Twain’s natural skepticism of Christianity and his ingrained Deistic faith in a rational universe began to creep into his notebooks and correspondence. In a letter to Livy he wrote, “Did Christ live 33 years in each of the millions and millions

of worlds that hold their majestic courses above our heads? Or was our small globe the favored one of all? Does one apple in a vast orchard think as much of itself as we do?” (LL 133). Albert Bigelow Paine writes that by late 1871 Twain had rejected his conversion altogether: “‘Livy,’ he said one day, ‘you may keep this up if you want to, but I must ask you to excuse me from it. It is making me a hypocrite. I don't believe in this Bible. It contradicts my reason. I can't sit here and listen to it, letting you believe that I regard it, as you do, in the light of gospel, the word of God’” (MTB II:411).

The hardened Deistic rationality Twain adopted following Henry's death was too firmly ingrained in his personality for his attempted return to Christian faith to completely overcome. Nevertheless, the close friendship he had developed with Twichell during that time, coupled with his devotion and love for Livy and his profound respect for her intelligence and moral character had introduced a new element into his religious ideology – that not all faithful Christians are foolish followers of unquestioning irrationality. The scorn Twain had shown almost unanimously for the pilgrims of the *Quaker City* had given way to a newfound respect for the ideals of Christianity and for those who actually lived the moral life epitomized by the religion. Though Twain would confess to his sister Pamela that he was “an entire and absolute unbeliever,” he would also write to his brother Orion that he did not “believe in hell or the divinity of the Savior, but no matter, the Savior is none the less a sacred Personage, and a man should have no desire or disposition to refer to him lightly, profanely or otherwise than with the profoundest reverence” (Neider, *Letters* 103).

This new development in Twain's religious ideology can be seen in a number of letters and essays from the time period. He seemed to balance his respect for the religion

with a fiery condemnation for hypocritical preachers that far surpassed the fervor of his previous imprecations. In February 1871, Twain wrote one of his contracted essays for the *Galaxy* magazine titled “The Indignity Put upon the Remains of George Holland by the Rev. Mr. Sabine” (*WIM* 51). Here Twain takes exception to the Reverend Sabine’s refusal to hold a church funeral for a prominent New York actor by calling the clergyman a “freak of nature” burdened with “cancerous piety,” a man given to “vapid platitudes,” and a “crawling, slimy, sanctimonious, self-righteous reptile” (*WIM* 51-53). However, Twain also returns to the technique that served him so well in *Innocents Abroad* of reversing the negativism of his rhetoric with a romantic description of Christian ideals: “nine-tenths of all the kindness and forbearance and Christian charity and generosity in the hearts of the American people today got there by being filtered down from their fountainhead, the gospel of Christ,” and that “all that is great and good in our particular civilization came straight from the hand of Jesus Christ” (*WIM* 53). The distinction that Twain develops seems to be that the ideals of Christianity in their moral essence are held to be estimable in and of themselves and those who claim to honor those ideals while demonstrating their hypocrisy are worthy only of reprobation.

We can see further evolution of this writing style in “Some Rambling Notes of an Idle Excursion” in which the captain, Hurricane Jones, defends the Biblical story of God’s fire falling on the prophets of Baal by hypothesizing that perhaps oil had been ignited by a match, and that “there ain’t a thing in the Bible but what is true; all you want is to go prayerfully to work and cipher out how ’t was done” (*WMT* XX:276). Here Twain both criticizes the irrationality of miracles as proclaimed in the Bible while supporting the notion that the spiritual message of the tale supersedes any of its factual

discrepancies. It is an alchemic blend of both Deistic rationality and Christian morality that Twain would spend the remainder of his writing career attempting to achieve.

CHAPTER III

TOM, HUCK, HANK AND JOAN

There has been only one Christian. They caught him and crucified him -- early.
-- Mark Twain, *Notebook* (1898)

Between 1876 and the end of the 19th Century, Twain would continually return in his writings to a single perplexing question: how does one explain man's dependence on moral guidance in a rational, Deistic universe? Though Twain rejected belief in Christian religious doctrine, he still desperately needed what Stanley Brodwin calls a "counter-theology" that would enable him to satisfy his "emotional longing for spiritual values" and escape "the psychological horror of accepting an essentially meaningless universe" (141, 142). Twain could not escape his internal longing for a justified moral belief system, and he would find part of the answer to his question, as he usually did, in a book.

Scholars including note that in the summer of 1874, Twain read William Edward Lecky's *History of European Morals from Augustus to Charlemagne*, and that Lecky's arguments on the nature of morality and justification greatly affected Twain's development of his best known works.¹ According to Kiskis, Lecky asserts that our moral sense is a realization of one's duty to nurture good behavior and restrain tendencies to bad behavior, and that such awareness exists in itself and apart from all consequences. Similarly, Williams argues that Twain echoes in *Tom Sawyer* and *The Prince and The*

Pauper Lecky's beliefs that it is merely the act of moral realization that is a necessary antecedent and condition of compassion (Williams 293). Harold Bush points out the key evaluation of Lecky's treatise that gave Twain the impetus he needed to move forward in his own religious development and resolve some of his internal debate (55). In Twain's much worn and heavily notated copy of Lecky's work, Twain wrote: "If I have understood this book aright, it proves two things beyond shadow or question: 1: That Christianity is the very invention of Hell itself; 2: And that Christianity is [also] the most precious and elevating and ennobling boon ever vouchsafed to the world" (Bush 55). This is a vitally important realization for Twain. Lecky gave him permission to openly accept that "Christian fanaticism has caused effusions of oceans of blood, and has been productive of incalculable misery to the world," but that Christianity, as an invention of man, is also the embodiment of man's conscious realization of the need for moral guidance (Parsons 63). Twain could rationalize consciousness as the natural evolution of man in an ordered universe created by a God that took no further active interest in such a creation. Lecky's analysis of consciousness further allowed Twain to adopt the position that Christianity is merely a rational development of man's conscious attempt to justify and codify the intuitive moral rules necessary for man's continued development and survival, and that it is the result of the subsequent organized churches, attempting to impose these codes through an irrational mythology, that Twain found so disagreeable. This development gave Twain part of the reasoning he needed for accepting the legitimacy of Livy's and Twichell's beliefs while still justifying his excoriation of Christianity as it is vitiated by most churches.

The Adventures of Tom Sawyer

Twain would make explicit use of Lecky's analysis of conscience in *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, which was published two years after he first read Lecky's work. Although the novel has typically been taught as a children's adventure story set in an idyllic southern town, Twain complicates Tom's pristine environment by setting up St. Petersburg as an imaginative moral landscape in which his young protagonist is exposed to the "strategies of self-aggrandizement practiced by the adults of the self-righteous village" (Robinson, "Social Play" 12). In the story, Tom is constantly faced with moral dilemmas in which he must choose between honesty and corruption. In the beginning of the novel, these are minor issues, primarily those that most children must make in the course of their moral development: minding their elders, playing pranks, avoiding responsibilities. Tom continually chooses the side of self-gratification and corruption, and Twain demonstrates this in part through a comparison between Tom's actions and those of his younger "good" brother, Sid, an obvious allusion to Twain's relationship with and feelings about his real brother Henry.

Those youthful moral issues, however, are quickly supplanted by the graveyard murder of Dr. Robinson, the supposed drowning of the children, and Injun Joe's plot against the Widow Douglas. Consequently, Tom is forced to make some very adult moral decisions. Should he go to the authorities with his knowledge of Dr. Robinson's slayer, and thus "ease his conscience" (*ATS* 90)? Should he dispel his aunt's grief over his supposed drowning by revealing his eavesdropping presence in her parlor, or indulge instead in the "theatrical gorgeousness" of returning to life at his own funeral (*ATS* 116). Most importantly, does his divulging the identity of Injun Joe as the killer, thus saving

the falsely accused Muff Potter, cause him to betray his best friend Huck to whom he has promised not to speak of what the two boys have witnessed?

Twain's decision to have Tom betray Huck's confidence in exchange for a grandstanding performance in the courtroom where "every eye fastened itself with wondering interest upon Tom" as a "glittering hero" demonstrates the type of moral malignancy that Twain found so deplorable in Christianity (*ATS* 170, 173). Moreover, through Tom's betrayal, Twain creates a character who is lacking in the kind of natural intuitive perception that Lecky describes as the necessary element for recognizing the difference between right and wrong. Instead, Tom appears to learn that self-serving notoriety takes precedence over any pain or danger he may cause to those around him.

By contrast, Twain creates in Huck a character who represents the kind of moral self awareness that Lecky describes and Twain prescribes. Huck has a kind of rough purity to his character that exists outside the refined, but ultimately false version of moral righteousness embodied by the townspeople; thus he is an outcast in more ways than one from this "idyllic" community. Twain exemplifies the difference by trapping Tom in McDougal's cave with Becky while Huck is left alone to spread the alarm about Injun's Joe's pending attack on the Widow Douglas. Thus, Huck becomes the novel's moral hero while Tom becomes a treasure seeker hunting "novelties to tell the upper world about" (*ATS* 223). Huck chooses the path of moral righteousness in protecting the Widow Douglas because "the widow's been good friends to me sometimes, and I want to tell everything" (*ATS* 209). Twain's differentiation of the two characters reveals Tom as the embodiment of the false Christian morality that promotes the self over veracity, and Huck

represents intuitive moral virtue unbounded by the confines of community or religious structure.

Twain's final commentary on the nature of a society that attempts to impose morality through an irrational structure like organized religion is to grant success and recognition only to the character who most closely emulates and supports its irrational behavior. The novel concludes with Tom wealthy as a result of the treasure he has found in the cave, acclaimed as a hero by the townspeople, and restored to the good graces of his sweetheart and her father. Huck, by contrast, is uncomfortable as a ward of the Widow Douglas and is prevented from running away by Tom's pleading that he accept the pretentious morality of St. Petersburg because "everybody does that way" (*ATS* 257). The strength of false piety, epitomized by Tom, appear to carry the day. Huck's expressed desire for personal freedom and his complaints about the constraints imposed on him by the Widow Douglas foreshadow the subsequent novel in which Twain would intensively explore the ambiguities of intuitive morality versus imposed morality.

The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn

It took Twain almost eight years to produce what has widely come to be considered his greatest work.² *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* represents Twain's most aggressive examination of man's search for rational moral guidance under the yoke of imposed religious values. His now highly developed method of reverse religious satire coupled with his new theological and philosophical attitudes about morality would form the structure of his novel. *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* represents the height of Twain's literary skills at the period of his life when Livy and their children provided him

the kind of familial love and support that kept the volatile writer grounded in reality. Unfortunately, the development of the book also coincided with Twain's greatest financial crises. Sales of *Tom Sawyer* were brisk initially, but only half that of his previous book *The Gilded Age*. Having just completed construction on his prestigious Hartford home, Twain was hoping for large sales of *Tom Sawyer* because, as he wrote to his friend William Dean Howells, "my household expenses are something almost ghastly" and require "inextinguishable money" (MTL 182). The length of time Twain spent developing *Huckleberry Finn* shows his determination not to compromise on his religious or political message in the novel. Whenever the writing would stall or Twain would find himself at a critical plot point, he would set the book aside. At any time during this period, he could easily have turned it into a straightforward adventure sequel to *Tom Sawyer* and expect strong sales,³ but he refused that option consistently because of his desire to make the book a vehicle for his personal exposé on morality and religion. Instead, Twain moved his entire family to Europe in spring 1878 to live more frugally while writing what he hoped would be another financially successful travel narrative on the scale of *Innocents Abroad*.

A Tramp Abroad was published in 1880 and is mostly a hodgepodge of his family's European travel exploits. *The Prince and the Pauper* published in 1882 represents a more serious attempt by Twain at literary fiction, but doesn't compare to the qualities of either *Tom Sawyer* or *Huckleberry Finn*. It wasn't until *Life on the Mississippi* was published with its profound exploration of the riverboat explosion and Twain's personal issues of guilt over Henry's death that Twain recovered a renewed sense of the dramatic possibilities for speculating on the moral issues necessary for the

completion of *Huckleberry Finn*. In fact, immediately following the completion of *Life on the Mississippi*, Twain returned to his half-finished masterpiece and produced 695 handwritten pages in six weeks (Powers 471).

Huckleberry Finn best demonstrates Twain's personal religious development at the time of its completion. Perhaps the break, while living in Europe, from his trademark contemplative writing style had reinvigorated the author's imagination and sense of purpose. The first 446 pages of original manuscript were written in the summer of 1876 and he confessed his disappointment in his first attempt at the grand satire in a letter to William Dean Howells: "I like it only tolerably well, and may pigeonhole or burn the manuscript when it is done" (Powers 471). Perhaps it was his effort of finally putting the guilt of Henry's death to rest in *Life on the Mississippi* or the easing of his financial woes, or a combination of the two, but the almost stream-of-consciousness writing that followed shows Twain at his literary peak. As *Life on the Mississippi* was being set in print in March of 1883, Twain wrote to Howells that "I have been an utterly free person for a month or two, I do not believe I ever so greatly appreciated and enjoyed...the absence of the chains of slavery as I do this time. I have nothing to do...I belong to nobody." He added, "of course the highest pleasure to be gotten out of freedom is labor. Therefore, I labor" (*MTL* I:442). Twain wrote to his mother in May: "I haven't had such booming working-days for many years. I am piling up manuscript in a really astonishing way...This summer it is no more trouble to me to write than it is to lie" (Powers 471). He bragged to Howells in July, "I wrote 4000 words today and I touch 3000 and upwards pretty often" (*MTL* I:435). What Twain accomplished during this period was a tour de force of literary fiction that eventually led Ernest Hemingway to pronounce "All modern

American literature comes from one book by Mark Twain called *Huckleberry Finn*” (Powers 476).

The novel is one of the most frequently analyzed and reviewed works in American literature, and alone it contains enough material for dozens of doctoral dissertations. With the plethora of available work on the subject, this thesis will avoid a thorough analysis of *Huckleberry Finn* so that more attention can be paid to Twain’s religious writings at the end of his career. Nevertheless, there are two key points that should be made in summarizing the themes of *Huckleberry Finn* as they relate to Twain’s religious philosophical development in his writing; his direct assault on Christian values and practices in the text, and the continuation of his distinction between societally-imposed versus personally-intuitive morality that he began in *Tom Sawyer*.

Twain’s assault on the underpinnings of Protestant Christianity is much more prominent in *Huckleberry Finn* than it is in its predecessor. In fact, the strongest direct criticism of religious persons in *Tom Sawyer* is Huck’s comment that Muff Potter “loafs around considerable” much in the way “of preachers and the like” (*ATS* 167). In *Huckleberry Finn*, however, the ridicule of Christian practice and teachings is present almost from the first page of the novel. Huck reveals in the first chapter that the example of Moses doesn’t mean much to him because “I don’t take no stock in dead people” (*AHF* 2). Then Huck’s literal interpretation of the power of prayer causes him to test it by asking for, but never receiving, fishhooks (*AHF* 13); and Jim reports that his following the advice of a black minister to give to the poor results only in the loss of the ten-cent piece he contributes (*AHF* 56-67).

These attacks are representative of additional satire found in the first half of the novel, the portion that was completed prior to his time in Europe. The second half of the book, however, compiled mostly of his work following *Life on the Mississippi*, shows much more frequent and acerbic assaults on Christian practices. The deadly feud between the Shepherdsons and Grangerfords, for example, is described ironically in the setting of a church:

Next Sunday we all went to church... the men took their guns along... and kept them between their knees or stood them handy against the wall. It was pretty ornery preaching – all about brotherly love, and such-like tiresomeness; but everybody said it was a good sermon...and had such a lot to say about faith, and good works, and free grace, and preforeordination, and I don't know what all, that it did seem to me to be one of the roughest Sundays I had run across yet (*AHF* 147).

Later that day, Huck returns to the church and notices that “there warn't anybody at the church, except maybe a hog or two... hogs like puncheon floor in summertime because it's cool” (*AHF* 148). The implication of the two passages is that churches are truly only worthwhile for utilitarian usage – such as housing pigs – since it's clear that people don't get the message. This is made most clear by Huck's admonition that “most folks don't go to church but only when they've got to, but a hog is different” (*AHF* 148).

Twain doesn't limit his criticism to established churches. The gullibility of revival attendees receives a healthy dose of Twain's censure as well. When the king pretends he is a newly reformed pirate who needs funds to return and spread the gospel among his former criminal associates, the crowd is taken in: “And then he busted into tears, and so did everybody. Then somebody sings out, “Take up a collection for him, take up a collection!”” (*AHF* 141). The ‘king’ is an obvious representation of the Christian church and, in Twain's opinion, of its unrelenting graft practiced upon its followers. Other

indictments of the practice of Christianity include an episode of a man slain in a gun battle who breathes his last breath beneath the weight of a Bible placed upon his chest, and, in the latter part of the book, Twain describes Uncle Silas Phelps as a preacher who “never charged nothing for his preaching, and it was worth it, too” (*AHF* 187, 285).

Twain’s most serious attack on Christianity in the novel, however, relates also to his carefully developed repudiation of imposing religious moral codes. The idea Twain had developed for his two main characters in *Tom Sawyer* is examined with greater intensity in *Huckleberry Finn*. At the beginning of the novel, Huck introduces the basic question of the nature of morality with a humorous aside: “what’s the use you learning to do right, when it’s troublesome to do right and ain’t no trouble to do wrong, and the wages is just the same?” (*AHF* 128). It’s a question around which the main plot of the novel would progress. Should Huck turn in the slave Jim, or continue to try and help him escape? For much of the early part of the novel, Huck drifts along, literally, with Jim at his side. It is Twain’s allegory for Huck’s search for moral guidance. That search is exemplified in chapter 31 when Huck considers the moral implications of betraying Jim back into slavery:

The more I studied about this, the more my conscience went to grinding me, and the more wicked, and low-down and ornery I got to feeling. And at last, when it hit me all of a sudden that here was the plain hand of Providence slapping me in the face and letting me know my wickedness was being watched all the time from up there in heaven, whilst I was stealing a poor old woman’s nigger that hadn’t ever done me no harm, and now was showing me there’s One that’s always on the lookout, and ain’t agoing to allow no such miserable doings to go only just so fur and no further, I most dropped in my tracks I was so scared. Well, I tried the best I could to kinder soften it up somehow for myself, by saying I was brung up wicked, and so I warn’t so much to blame; but something inside of me kept saying, “There was the Sunday School, you could a gone to it; and if you’d a done it they’d a learnt you, there, that people that acts as I’d been acting about that nigger goes to everlasting fire” (*AHF* 268-269).

Here, with a hyperbolic vengeance, Twain ridicules the notion of eternal punishment for sin – the idea of God literally peering down “from up there in heaven” to catch Huck aiding a runaway slave is logically ridiculous. Further, Huck’s confusing the pernicious teaching of pro-slavery southerners with the genuinely humane ideals of Livy’s and Twichell’s Christian faiths echoes Twain’s (and Lecky’s) assertion that Christian practice, as often as not, sponsors heinous social crimes.

It is in Huck’s decision to tear up his note informing Miss Watson where her slave, Jim, is located that Twain most clearly delineates between the Christian form of imposed morality and the individual conscience of natural morality: “‘All right, then, I’ll go to hell,’ – and tore it up” (*AHF* 150). As Powers explains, “from the mid-20th century on, the moral majesty of this moment has been almost universally assumed” (475). Huck’s willingness to accept damnation for what he believes to be God’s law is clearly derived from his personal relationship with his friend Jim and his conscious choice of individual moral righteousness over societal expectations.

The improbable introduction of Tom back into the narrative begins what is known as the ‘evasion’ chapters. Many critics and scholars, including Powers, Leo Marx, and Richard Gollin criticize Twain for these chapters as being “a glaring lapse of moral imagination” on Twain’s part (Marx 435). However, if viewed from the perspective of *Tom Sawyer* where Tom represents the irrationality of an imposed moral structure, then the “silliness” of these chapters makes more sense. Indeed, the re-introduction of Tom into Huck’s life represents a thorough dismantling of Huck’s ostensible discovery of intuitive morality and his “passive submission to Tom’s will,” in the preparations for

Jim's rescue, as Janet Gabler-Hover remarks, "is a necessarily disturbing reminder that Huck's role in society is as a victim" (74). Twain uses this episode as a reminder of both the reality and the dangers of accepting societal rule over personal conscience. As Huck says, "a person's conscience ain't got no sense, and just goes for him anyway...if I had a yaller dog that didn't know no more than a person's conscience does, I would pison him" (*AHF* 290). Huck's rejection of his own personal convictions and acceptance of Tom's "proper way of doing things" is a message of futility that Twain felt regarding the world in which he lived and in which the novel was written. However, Twain's message would not go unnoticed. Twain had an excellent understanding of human nature and human curiosity, so he appended the novel with his famous notice: -- persons attempting to find a motive in this narrative will be prosecuted; persons attempting to find a moral in it will be banished; persons attempting to find a plot in it will be shot -- guaranteeing, of course, that virtually every reader would attempt to find all three (*AHF* xxv).

Connecticut Yankee and Joan of Arc

In the years between the completion of *Huckleberry Finn* and Livy's death in 1904, Twain would complete a number of books, but only two are serious attempts at examining his religious ideas. If *Huckleberry Finn* was an attack on the moral imposition of American Protestantism, then *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* would be its companion work lambasting the Catholic church. Twain himself called the work, "One vast sardonic laugh...at the professions and the insolence of priestcraft and kingcraft" (*MTS* 273). However, where *Huckleberry Finn* primarily consisted of satire and humor to

attack religious institutions, *Connecticut Yankee* is a gloves off, straightforward assault on the Roman church:

In two or three little centuries it had converted a nation of men to a nation of worms. Before the day of the Church's supremacy in the world, men were men, and held their heads up, and had a man's pride, and spirit and independence; but then the Church came to the front...and she invented the divine right of kings and propped it all around, brick by brick, with Beatitudes – wrenching them from their good purpose to make them fortify an evil one...Even down to my birth century that poison was still in the blood of Christendom (CY 113).

Hank's self-satisfied boast that he is equal to the king in power is tempered by the admission that the church is "a trifle stronger than both of us put together" (CY 109).

Hank also muses that "any established Church is an established crime" (CY 185). Twain uses the society of King Arthur to demonstrate the dangers of unthinking acceptance of religious verities that are promulgated by selfish churchmen who insist on the rightness of the "state of things ordained by God" (CY 156). Hank's "vastest project," the overthrow of the Catholic Church, is an attempt to introduce genuine moral change into King Arthur's society and save mankind from unthinking obeisance to a corrupt institution. That Hank's attempt is ultimately doomed to failure is another example of Twain's acceptance of, but lifelong frustration with, the nature of humankind and the dominance of society over the individual. This defeat echoes the lesson at the end of *Huckleberry Finn*. Although Hank is more vocal in his determination to fight religious injustice than Huck ever was, Hank's defeat and his death demonstrate the futility that Twain felt in fighting the overwhelming societal forces that impose irrational forms of morality on all people. Nevertheless, *Connecticut Yankee* would also inspire Twain to address the issue one more time in what would become his most explicit approbation of individual moral strength, *The Personal Recollections of Joan of Arc*.

Twain came to believe in an underlying struggle between societal and individual morality in which society always triumphed. Twain would derive one of his most famous quotations from this issue: “It is curious – curious that physical courage should be so common in the world, and moral courage so rare” (qtd in Powers 626). The idea of moral courage strong enough to defy society and bring about true change fascinated Twain, and in the story of Joan of Arc, he discovered it. For Twain, Joan stands as a spiritual example for humankind, giving tangible form to the valorization of conscious individualized morality. The best part, for Twain, was the reality of such a tale. William Dean Howells captured the essence of Twain’s fascination in his review of the work:

What can we say, in this age of science, that will explain away the miracle of that age of faith? For these things really happened. There was actually this peasant maid who believed she heard voices from Heaven bidding her take command of the French armies and drive the English out of her country...It reads like a wild and foolish invention, but is every word most serious truth. It is preposterous, it is impossible, but it is all undeniable (qtd in Powers 154-155).

So perfectly suited was the real life Joan to Twain’s ideal of intuitive morality that he referred to her often in his later years as the moral role model by which all others should be judged. In 1910’s “The Turning Point of My Life,” one of the last pieces Twain ever wrote, he said:

What I cannot help wishing is, that Adam and Eve had been postponed, and Martin Luther and Joan of Arc put in their place – that splendid pair equipped with temperaments not made of butter, but of asbestos. By neither sugary persuasions nor by hellfire could Satan have beguiled them to eat the apple (*WIM* 464).

Twain’s intention to publish the novel anonymously is an indication of how seriously he took the subject matter of the novel and hoped his readers would as well. Indeed, the embrace of a morally perfect heroine who possesses “the loftiest place possible to human

attainment” reflects Twain’s belief in the ability of the human conscience to embrace rationality and morality and transcend the debilitating tyranny of church and state (*JA* vii).

Joan becomes a catalyst for reviving the inner spirit of the French commoners in defiance of the corrupt church and nobility as represented by Cauchon. The contrast between Joan and Cauchon is underscored through the lengthy and elaborate heresy trials to which Joan is subjected. *Joan of Arc* represents Twain’s most sophisticated and direct comparison of personal divinity and intuitive morality versus organized religion and societally-imposed morality. It is a Manichean allegory; a contention between the forces of a diabolically conspiratorial and deformed clergy and a lone, traditionally weak creature who represents a purity of soul and personal strength derived from direct communion with divinity; someone who has “laid her hand upon accepted truth that is as old as the world” (*JA* 412). Joan’s personal and unmediated relationship with divinity points the way to the intensely personal theology that Twain would soon begin working out for himself following the deaths of his daughter and wife.

Joan of Arc would represent Twain’s last attempt at a commercially viable literary discussion of the nature of man and morality. Three months after its publication, Twain would receive notice that his eldest child, Susy, had died of spinal meningitis while he, Livy and Clara were traveling in Europe. It would stir up all the feelings of guilt over Henry’s death that he thought he had laid to rest with the publication of *Life on the Mississippi*. With the death of Livy a few years later, Twain’s last remaining anchor to societal norms would vanish, and his writing would turn toward much darker, angrier and

vindictive attacks on the foundations of organized religion, though also a much more introspective exploration of issues related to personal divinity, mortality and forgiveness.

CHAPTER IV

THE MYSTERIOUS STRANGER

*Why do we forgive God for acts we would never forgive a man?
-- Letters from the Earth*

The last two decades of Twain's career and life are usually described as a period in which a succession of family deaths and business failures left him enfeebled as a writer obsessed with his own personal vendetta with God. Yet the conclusion of critics like Bernard De Voto that "his world toppled in ruins around him," and of Ron Powers that "death and loss and the embarrassment of his own failing body haunted his final years in despair," belie the reality that during this time Twain produced some of his finest diatribes on the nature of irrational faith (Powers 618). Granted, most of these works wouldn't be published until some years after his death, mostly due to their controversial nature, extreme views and often offensive attacks on the practice of Christianity. As Twain himself wrote to Howells in 1906, "Tomorrow I mean to dictate a chapter which will get my heirs and assigns burnt alive if they venture to print it this side of 2006" (SL 305).

The series of events that led Twain to so drastically alter his writing began with the death of Susy immediately following the publication of *Joan of Arc*. "[Twain] was standing in the dining room of the cottage at Guildford when the cable arrived: 'Susy was peacefully released today'" (Powers 578). Twain would later remark in his autobiography

“It is one of the mysteries of our nature that a man, all unprepared, can receive a thunder-stroke like that and live” (*CFMA* 186).

Twain had lost his favorite daughter and the frustration of his lifelong battle with the irrationality of the Christian God came flooding out. In a letter he wrote to Livy the following day he laments over his daughter in her coffin, “I wish there were five of the coffins, side by side, out of my heart of hearts I wish it...How lovely is death; and how niggardly it is doled out” (Powers 578). The anguished tones of “In My Bitterness,” written on the first anniversary of Susy’s death, leave no doubt that Twain once again felt confounded by the apparent malevolence of a God who operates in bad faith, for he unsparingly attacks the Deity who “gives you a wife and children you adore, only that through the spectacle of the wanton shame and miseries which He will inflict upon them He may tear the palpitating heart out of your breast and slap you in the face with it” (*FOM* 131).

However, Twain still had Livy, and her presence kept him somewhat grounded in his work and life. His love and respect for her can be seen in a letter he wrote to Howells a month after Susy’s death: “To me our loss is bitter, bitter, bitter. Then what must it be to my wife. It would bankrupt all vocabularies of all the languages to put it into words” (Powers 579). Nevertheless, Twain needed Livy’s guidance perhaps more than she needed his understanding. Although the years from 1895 until 1904 were occasionally troubled by what Twain himself characterized as “poverty and debt,” his only true solace was to be found in Livy who “was always able to reason me out of my despairs and find a bright side to the clouds and make me see it” (*MTA* II:27).

In 1898, however, Livy began to suffer the first episodes of what would become a six-year decline in her health. Though Twain would produce a number of essays, short stories and even one novella, he spent the majority of his time enjoying his fame and traveling the world with Livy in search of medical care for both her and their daughter Jean who suffered from epilepsy. In 1904 Twain and his family were living in Italy where doctors cared for Livy around the clock and ordered Twain to visit with her for only one hour per day (Powers 615). Twain often snuck in to see her though and wrote many letters that he would slip under her door. One such letter, written just before her death, provides some insight into Twain's personal theological explorations during this time: "Dear, dear sweetheart, I have been thinking and examining, and searching and analyzing for many days, and am vexed to find that I more believe in the immortality of the soul than misbelieve in it" (Powers 615).

Among scholars who attempt to classify Twain as either atheist or agnostic, some see this declaration to Livy as an attempt on Twain's part to alleviate Livy's fear regarding Twain's disbelief in Christianity. Ron Powers called it "almost certainly a white lie" (615). However, this attitude demonstrates a clear lack of understanding of both Twain's theological philosophy and the nature of his thirty-four year marriage to Livy. Twain always viewed Livy as an intellectual equal and relied on her common sensibilities and bedrock faith to guide him through his remarkable writing career. To condescend to her faith in the final moments of her life would be an act of moral ignominy the likes of which Twain himself had ridiculed and railed against for more than three decades. For his defense, Powers quotes a single statement scrawled by Twain in his notebooks a few months prior: "One of the proofs of the immortality of the soul, is

that myriads have believed in it. They also believed the world was flat” (Powers 616). However, as with most statements used by critics to argue for Twain’s atheism, this one falls into one of Twain’s classic logical traps. Though Twain was always quick to point out the fallacies of Christian dialectic as he does here, he was also always careful to accept the rational idea that a lack of proof in God’s existence does not necessarily equate with the proof of the lack of God’s existence. Indeed, if one were to examine the dozens of published quotations by Twain related to God and Christianity, at no time does Twain ever categorically deny God’s existence. On the contrary, more often than not, Twain accepts the existence of God as described through Deism and merely criticizes the practice of a religion invented by man for the purpose of imposing irrationally strict moral guidelines. Twain’s belief in the immortality of the soul, however little proof he could find for it, can be seen in numerous instances of Twain’s actions and writings. In at least one instance, Twain attempted to contact the spirit of his dead brother, Henry, through a medium (Robinson 178). He also writes in a letter following Susy’s death, “Will healing ever come, or life have value again? And shall we see Susy? Without doubt!” (*MTL* II:663). Additionally, one may simply read the letter Twain wrote to Howells on the day after Livy’s death to ascertain the verity of Twain’s comment to his wife: “I bent over her and looked in her face and I think I spoke – I was surprised and troubled that she did not notice me. Then we understood and our hearts broke... I am tired and old; I wish I were with Livy” (*MTL* 785). This final lament for his lost love more than demonstrates Twain’s belief in the immortality of the soul.

With Livy’s death, according to Michael Kiskis, Twain became untethered from his connection to the physical world around him. He no longer took an interest in

commercial literary pursuits, but rather spent the final six years of his life exploring religious and philosophical issues with an intensity of “an almost separate career spent in search for religious truth” (Kahn 196). In this short time, Twain would produce such works as “Adam’s Diary,” “Adam’s Soliloquy,” “Eve’s Autobiography,” “Eve’s Diary,” “The War Prayer,” *Letters from Earth*, *What is Man*, and his ultimate religious treatise, *The Mysterious Stranger*. All of these works attempt to address Twain’s theological issues with the Christian God in a much more direct confrontation with the Deity rather than through the more subtle themes found in his best known novels about society’s imposed morality and the logical fallacies of Christian doctrine. The shift in style is clear when reading any of the works from this period. The overriding theme in each of them reflects Twain’s somewhat flawed syllogism: if God created the universe (an assumption that Twain never questioned in any of his writings), and the universe is treacherous, irrational and unfair in its development and treatment of mankind, then God, as author of such malignancy, must also be deceitful, untruthful and unreliable. Furthermore, if God had a hand in the creation of mankind directly, and had foreknowledge of mankind’s fall from grace, then free will is an illusion and humans must be exonerated as agents of sin and suffering. Instead, God as the entity who created the predetermined temperament of man and inevitable transgressions is ultimately the guilty party. As Twain writes near the end of *What is Man?*, “God made man a machine at the mercy of his inborn temperament” (*WIM* 210).

Twain’s argument that original sin is ultimately the fault of a God who victimizes his own creations rather than takes responsibility for his own manipulations is repeated in most of these late works. In *Letters from Earth*, for example, Twain writes:

Naturally you will think the threat to punish Adam and Eve for disobeying was of course not carried out, since they did not create themselves, nor their natures nor their impulses nor their weaknesses and hence were not properly subject to any one's commands, and not responsible to anybody for their acts. It will surprise you to know that the threat was carried out. Adam and Eve were punished, and that crime finds apologists to this day (*LFE* 87).

In "Eve Speaks," Twain summarizes this point again and adds a plug for intuitive personal morality and the idea of simple consciousness as the basis for righteousness:

We could not know it was wrong to disobey the command, for the words were strange to us and we did not understand them. We did not know right from wrong – how should we know? We could not, without the Moral Sense; it was not possible. If we had been given the Moral Sense first – ah, that would have been fairer, that would have been kinder; then we should be to blame if we disobeyed (*LFE* 113).

By projecting humankind's weaknesses onto a deceitful creator, Twain is able to 'villainize' the God of Christianity and therefore mount a campaign against what he deemed an irrational belief system. At the same time, by introducing again Lecky's idea that conscious thought is the only necessary ingredient for an intuitive, natural morality, then Twain can begin to establish an argument that the Christian God is, in fact, merely an illusion of mankind manifested from the human need to justify our own moral failures. In a letter to Twichell, Twain argues that if God is an illusion of our "thought," then "the absurdities that govern life and the universe lose their absurdity and become natural, and a thing to be expected" from the human mind (*MSM* 30). Stanley Brodwin points out that much of Twain's fiction during this time evokes "a pattern of constant promise – the promise of moral goodness and its rewards of health, wealth, and peace – and the even more constant betrayal of such promise because God is reduced to a meaningless and unreal nightmare" (Brodwin 170).

The solution to the problem of convincing the reader (and himself) that an imagined God is an undependable, insincere and often malevolent Deity of our own design was to use a character of near equal power to help explain the rationale for rejecting man's existing belief system. The savior he fastened upon was Satan. For Christians, Twain knew, Satan represented a fallen Archangel who once had the temerity to challenge God directly, ironically similar to what Twain was attempting to accomplish in these writings. Twain uses Satan as a dissenting voice who questions God's motives and methods and, by his example, gives humankind the incentives to examine more closely the basis of their own perceived sin against an unjust God.

In *Letters from the Earth*, Satan seeks to correct the Biblical representation of God with his own account of the fall of man. Repeating the idea that Twain had already developed for his other late-life religious epistles, Satan points out that if God made Adam and Eve incapable of resisting temptation, then He should more rightly be assigned the customary role of "the devil": "As you perceive, the only person responsible for the couple's offense escaped; and not only escaped but became the executioner of the innocent" (*LFE* 118). However, Satan, like Twain, doesn't reserve his animosity for God alone; he is quick to place the blame for God's irascible nature where it belongs: "Man is a marvelous curiosity, he thinks he is the creator's pet, he even believes the creator loves him; has a passion for him; gives up nights to admire him; yes and watch over him and keep him out of trouble. He prays to him and thinks he listens. Isn't it a quaint idea" (*LFE* 118).

Satan also characterizes the serpent in the Garden of Eden as remarkably convenient ploy for God's diabolical scheme to deprive humans of what "the priest, like

God, whose imitator and representative he is, has made it his business from the beginning to keep man from knowing” – that humans are the unwitting victims of their own imagination, and the God they manifested from that imagination will swindle, steal and lie His way to continued existence (*LFE* 143). Furthering this argument, Satan points out that the advent of Hell as a pit of eternal damnation, as well as the advent of Jesus who supposedly relieved mankind of his sins, are both “immense sarcasms” because humankind by its very temperament cannot avoid sinning (*LFE* 153).

Twain’s development of Satan as an advocate for humankind’s personal salvation had begun soon after Susy’s death as part of a what would eventually become his final theological treatise on the nature of God, morality, society and human consciousness. *The Mysterious Stranger* manuscripts were begun in early 1897 and, like *Huckleberry Finn* would take almost a full decade to complete as he regularly worked on, revised and set aside the story whenever the writing bogged down. Like most authors, Twain often started a story to see where it led, and then after working through its problems would alter characters, setting, structure and themes to move the work forward. This process can be seen in virtually all of Twain’s completed works, but most significantly in *Huckleberry Finn*. Scholars then focus on the published version for analysis, with comparisons to early drafts useful only for observing the writer’s process.

The problem with *The Mysterious Stranger* manuscripts, however, is that Twain never actually completed the work prior to his death, and this has led most scholars and critics to erroneously examine all versions of the manuscripts on an equal footing. The inevitable result is that critics like Bernard DeVoto and Roger Solomon see these often contradictory and mismatched manuscripts as proof of Twain’s “descent into solipsism

and despair in his later years” (Eutsey 53). Part of the fault for this error lay in what has become known as the Paine-Duneka edited version of the work unfortunately titled *The Mysterious Stranger, A Romance*. Twain’s biographer and literary executor Albert Bigelow Paine, along with Frederick Duneka of Harper Brothers publishing, attempted to cobble together from the three different manuscripts a completed but grossly edited novel as a children’s Christmas gift book in 1916, marketed as “The final complete work” of Mark Twain (*MSM* 1). It wasn’t until William Gibson carefully rehabilitated the original Twain manuscripts in 1969 that scholars began to see the work as something much greater than De Voto’s pronouncement of the work as “a symbol of despair that prevented the author from sliding into madness at the end of his life.” Instead, as Dwayne Eutsey points out, Twain’s final version of the manuscript, “*No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger*, can be read as the culmination of Twain’s lifelong attempt to develop a reasoned out faith that satisfied his conscience” (Eutsey 53, 55).

Twain developed the incomplete first and second manuscripts in the periods from 1897 until Livy’s death in 1904. From the start, like *Huckleberry Finn*, Twain intended the work to be a serious and significant personal statement on his theological philosophy. As he wrote to his lifelong friend Howells in the spring of 1899:

For several years I have been intending to stop writing for print as soon as I could afford it. At last I can afford it, and have put the potboiler pen away. What I have been wanting is a chance to write a book without reserves, a book which should take account of no one’s feelings and no one’s prejudices, opinions, beliefs, hopes, illusions, delusions, a book which should say my say right out of my heart in the plainest language and without a limitation of any sort... I believe I can make it tell what I think of Man, and how he is constructed, and what a shabby poor ridiculous thing he is, and how mistaken he is in his estimate of his character and powers and qualities and his place among the animals (*SL* 256).

The intense desire to produce such a treatise was sparked by Susy's untimely death and Twain often turned to the manuscripts as a kind of therapy whenever his grief and anger overcame him:

Sometimes my feelings are so hot that I have to take to the pen and pour them out on paper to keep them from setting me afire inside: then all that ink and labor are wasted, because I can't print the result. I have just finished an article of this kind and it satisfies me entirely, as concerns interpreting the Deity. It does my weather-beaten soul good to read it, and admire the trouble it would make for me and the family. I will leave it behind and utter it from the grave. There is free speech there, and no harm to the family (*SL 182*).

However, it was "the family," or, more specifically, Livy, who kept Twain's writing reserved to the point that he struggled with the project. For 34 years, Livy's firm religious beliefs and intellectual influence on Twain provided an anchorage from which he could safely examine and satirize the nature of God and religion in his fiction. With Livy in his life, we are awarded with characters like Huck Finn who explores an infinite world from a raft on the Mississippi. His is a character readers could identify with. Without Livy's constant guidance, it might very well have been Huck Finn riding a comet to heaven rather than Captain Stormfield. However, for Twain to produce this great work "without limitation of any sort," he would have to become untethered from the physical reality that grounded him in his thoughts. In that same letter to Howells, Twain mentioned "I let the Madam into the secret day before yesterday and locked the doors and read to her the opening chapters. She said: "It is perfectly horrible – and perfectly beautiful! Within the due limits of modesty, that is what I think" (*SL 256*). Twain's desire, however, was to produce a work completely outside the "due limits of modesty," and that would only become possible after June 5, 1904. Livy's death would end Twain's self-censorship; it would end his modesty; and it would end his ties to the physical world: "She was my life,

and she is gone. She was my riches, and I am a pauper...She was [my] head, she was [my] hands...and I am as one who wanders and has lost his way” (SL 287, 288).

Shortly after Livy’s death, Twain would revise the entire manuscript, starting with a six-page draft of the concluding chapter that laid out what Twain felt would be his ultimate message on the nature of God. Much like he did with the conclusive chapters of *Huckleberry Finn*, Twain would sit and produce more than 30,000 words of handwritten copy in less than two months. Unfortunately for Twain, he would fail at his goal to stop writing for print and produce only this final “vessel to contain all the ordure” of his beliefs (SL 256). He was under constant pressure in his final years to produce essays and other short works for publication, and his recognition of his own advancing age motivated him to produce an autobiography with the help of his friend Paine. These pressures, combined with Jean’s declining health and his regular engagements to receive honorary degrees and appear in public, prevented Twain from finding the time he needed to edit his theological opus into a polished, completed work. Nevertheless, *No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger* represents Twain’s intended final commentary on God and religion and is thus the most appropriate work for examining his now fully developed personal religious philosophy.

No. 44 The Mysterious Stranger

Building on the themes and religious explorations of all his previous work, Twain developed *No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger* as a theological treatise on the natures of Man and God. What started Twain on this path was his naturally independent and rational mind that rebelled against the Calvinistic doctrine of his youth. His exposure to Thomas

Paine's *The Age of Reason* combined with the tragic death of Henry provided him with the reasoning and motivation to reject Christian doctrine in favor of rational Deism. In Twain's early writing, he explores the relationship between good and evil and their place in a rational, deistic universe. However, Twain still had an intense need to justify human morality, and W.H. Lecky provided him with part of the solution to that problem; the intuitive nature of basic human consciousness. In his novels, Twain addresses the source and nature of morality, the corrupting power of secular religion, the absurdity of metaphysical certainty, and the possibility of a direct relationship with the Deity through an emphatically intuitive consciousness. The power of humankind's consciousness to shape its own reality began to fascinate Twain and no doubt received support from the intellectual community in which Twain circulated in the early 20th century. Beginning with the death of Susy, and consummated by the death of Livy, Twain's creative, intellectual freedom would finally coalesce around the idea that it is the human mind and its conscious and unconscious cerebral awareness that form reality and create divinity.

This message, as it is communicated in *No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger*, provides Twain with the ultimate solution to his lifelong explorations of moral awareness, sin and forgiveness: that through the power of individual consciousness and creativity there is hope for a transcendence to a better, more just world, emancipated from the dominion of a punishing God. Regarding the structure and message of *No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger*, Dwayne Eutsey writes, "underlying Twain's satirical deconstructions of traditional religion, there seems to be an earnest quest to discover a true experience of the divine beyond the surface of genteel religiosity" (55). With this manuscript, the rational idealism that had animated Twain's religious exploration throughout his career finally is

transformed into an idealized self capable of transcending the physical universe rather than accepting the subjugation inherent in the God and man relationship as promulgated by conventional religion. Twain instead proposes that the unfettered imagination can, like the recalcitrant 44² in *Mysterious Stranger*, create its own reality – its own universe – in essence, become God. In the last chapter of the story, written first by Twain as the conclusion of his treatise, 44's parting words to August are a reminder that “you will remain a Thought, the only existent Thought, and by your nature inextinguishable, indestructible” (MSM 404).

The elements with which Twain would infuse the work represent some of the finest techniques of his writing style. He uses satire, humor and the absurd in ways that inspire introspection on the part of the reader and challenges religious assumptions. In the first chapter, Twain sets the story in the idyllic Austrian town of Eseldorf, which was “a paradise for us boys” (MSM 222). He makes note of their expected life and education:

Mainly we were trained to be good Catholics; to revere the Virgin, the Church and the saints above everything; to hold the Monarch in awful reverence, speak of him with bated breath, uncover before his picture, regard him as the gracious provider of our daily bread and of all our earthly blessings, and ourselves as being sent into the world with the one only mission, to labor for him, bleed for him, die for him, when necessary. Beyond these matters we were not required to know much; and in fact, not allowed to. The priests said that knowledge was not good for the common people, and could make them discontented with the lot which God had appointed for them, and God would not endure discontentment with His plans (MSM 222).

Twain's obvious parallel between worship for the Monarch and traditional Catholic worship of God is clear. It's an obvious reference to the first commandment, “ye shall have no God before me.” Nevertheless, for these boys, the Monarch and God are essentially equal. Thus enters “Number 44, New Series 864,962” (MSM 238). It is

important to note here, that although Twain had developed the first manuscripts of *No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger* using Satan, or some relative of Satan, to communicate these ideas in the guise of 44, nowhere in the third version does Twain make that connection. Some scholars seem intent on referring to 44 as an earthly embodiment of Satan in all of the manuscripts, but this is more a reflection of the influence the Paine-Duneka version of the story has had on most critics. Following Livy's death, and in the development of the most complete and final version of *No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger*, Twain seems to have abandoned the connection of 44 as a Satan-like, or Satan influenced character and instead adopted the character's mission as both a teacher of the kind of knowledge that would make people discontented with the "lot God had appointed for them," and serve as "Twain's literary representation of what he called in *Letters from the Earth* an all-round view of God" (Eutsey 55).

After 44 performs a number of miracles and demonstrates a god-like innate knowledge of all things, the people and the priest of Eseldorf develop the kind of hatred for 44 that Twain saw as endemic in society. After 44 is destroyed by the Magician in chapter 17, he returns from the dead in chapter 18 and startles Augustus by his appearance: "It wasn't an illusion, I died;" proclaims 44, "and added indifferently, 'it is nothing, I have done it many a time!'" (*MSM* 313). Here Twain introduces the idea that physical reality is merely an illusion of the conscious and unconscious mind. His character 44 appears and vanishes with a thought, travels the globe at the speed of thought and exists outside of time and space: "'lad, it's getting late – for you; time does not exist, for me....Good-night' and he vanished" (*MSM* 316).

The story of 44 and his education of August in *No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger* contains a number of Twain's thoughts on the nature of God and Man that can be found in his previous works. The idea of a Deistic God uninterested in the daily lives of mankind, for example, can be seen most clearly in chapter 19 in the exchange between 44 and August when 44 explains that he is not actually human:

“I think the human race is well enough, in its way, all things considered, but surely, August, I have never intimated that I belonged to it. Reflect. Now have I?”...

“Since you are not a human being, what are you?...”

“The difference between a human being and me is the difference between a drop of water and the sea, a rushlight and the sun, the difference between the infinitely trivial and the infinitely sublime”...

I said I was in awe of him, and was more moved to pay him reverence than to...

“Reverence!” he mocked; “put it away; the sun doesn't care for the rushlight's reverence, put it away” (*MSM* 318-319).

This is also a clear indication of Twain's decision to use 44 as an allusion to divine thought. Forty-four has all the power and knowledge of God, without any of the expected reverence for the position. On the issue of reverence itself, Twain even works in one of his favorite witticisms: “Irreverence is another person's disrespect to your god; there isn't any word that tells what your disrespect to his god is” (*MSM* 386).

August's exposure to the hypocrisies of religion and the irrationality of mankind's physical world make up the bulk of the story and provide Twain with a vehicle for summarizing all of his criticism on the effects of an imposed moral structure under a restrictive society created by a humanity that is naturally predisposed to sin. Justice and freedom for the human soul can never exist in such a system. The final chapter contains the essence of Twain's theological conclusions on this matter. First, on the nature of God:

“Strange, indeed, that you should have suspected that your universe and its contents were only dreams, visions, fictions! Strange, because they are so frankly and hysterically insane – like all dreams: a God who could make good children as easily as bad, yet preferred to make bad ones; who could have made every one of them happy, yet never made a single happy one; who made them prize their bitter life, yet stingily cut it short; who gave his angels eternal happiness unearned, yet required his other children to earn it; who gave his angels painless lives, yet cursed his other children with biting miseries and maladies of mind and body; who mouths justice, and invented hell--mouths mercy, and invented hell--mouths Golden Rules and forgiveness multiplied by seventy times seven, and invented hell; who mouths morals to other people, and has none himself; who frowns upon crimes, yet commits them all; who created man without invitation, then tries to shuffle the responsibility for man’s acts upon man, instead of honorably placing it where it belongs, upon himself; and finally, with altogether divine obtuseness, invites his poor abused slave to worship him!” (*MSM* 404).

Then, on the nature of Man:

“Life itself is only a vision, a dream”

It was electrical. By God I had had that very thought a thousand times in my musings!

“Nothing exists; all is a dream...you perceive, now, that these things are all impossible, except in a dream. You perceive that they are pure and puerile insanities, the silly creations of an imagination that is not conscious of its freaks – in a word, that they are a dream, and you the maker of it... there is no God, no universe, no human race, no earthly life, 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 forlorn among the empty eternities!”

He vanished, and left me appalled, for I knew, and realized, that all he had said was true” (*MSM* 405).

Though Twain never completed his edits and final construction of this work, it is clear that its ideas were on his mind until his last days. In a late notebook entry, Twain concluded that what he called his “spiritualized-self” was able to escape the bonds of “clogging flesh” and fly “to the ends of the earth in a millionth of a second” (Harris 92).

The serenity that Twain seems to have achieved in this work is evident in his final year of life. His lifelong struggles with guilt, personal loss and anger at an irrational God found resolution in the power of his own supremely creative mind; that he was God, and

that the final release from the bounds of the physical world would grant him a transcendence beyond that punishing God and the freedom to explore the unbounded universe in a *thought*.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

Mark Twain once quipped that “the primary difference between the Bible God and the real God is that the former is vindictive, unjust, ungenerous, pitiless, vengeful, cruel, and a punisher of the innocent. The genuine God is not much more appealing, he’s just not interested.” Twain also wrote in his Notebook in 1898:

(God’s) real character is written in plain words in his real Bible, which is Nature and her history; we read it every day, and we could understand it and trust in it if we would burn the spurious one and dig the remains of our insignificant reasoning faculties out of the grave where that and other man-made Bibles have buried them for 2000 years and more (*LY 91*)

That Twain spent his life and career searching for answers to the nature of divinity is clear. Ultimately, Twain came to believe that a genuine religious experience rooted in thought and study and deliberate conviction was possible. His many commentaries on God, as harsh as they frequently were, often expressed a theological hope that humanity is capable of considering the authentic creator of the real universe instead of the false gods “whose myriads infest the feeble imagination of men” (*Eutsey 54*). Twain’s ultimate conclusion, of course, is that the authentic creator of the real universe was mankind’s collective consciousness.

This theology of the realized self and a universe that stemmed from mankind’s creative imagination is an almost inevitable outcome of his lifelong allegiance to both individualism and irreverence. The seed in which his vision was formed had been planted

by a mother who professed strict Presbyterianism and a father who rejected formal religion but embraced the strictest moral rectitude. This commitment to moral perfectionism in his youth was reinforced by his view of a world inhabited by immoral and imperfect humans who exhorted Christian followers to embrace an imposed but irrational moral code. His brother's death combined with the rational Deism of Thomas Paine helped shape Twain's religious cynicism more than any other event in his life. That cynicism, however, banked by Livy's intellectualism and traditional beliefs, was refined and honed into a razor-sharp wit that illuminated for his audience the corrupting influence of conventional religion. The major writings of his career, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, and *The Personal Recollections of Joan of Arc*, address these religious and societal issues through satire and allegory and helped establish Twain's literary immortality. However, the personal tragedies that clouded his life in the last two decades both altered Twain's religious thought and freed him from the confines of societal expectations so he could write about them. In particular, *No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger*, represents Twain's ultimate treatise on the nature of God as the creation of human consciousness. In securing this freedom from the restrictive beliefs that society imposes on humankind, Twain is finally able to attain a kind of material perfection beyond the authority of God to judge, and a moral innocence beyond the boundaries of good and evil to influence.

Twain's rejection of Christianity and its God as punisher, along with Twain's constant vilification of false piety, are among the many reasons that some scholars cite when arguing that Twain was either an atheist or skeptical agnostic. However, those

scholars are starting with a premise that Twain didn't hold, that there is at least some merit in those man-made religions of which many of these scholars also claim membership. What these scholars consistently fail to recognize is that Twain absolutely did believe in God, just not theirs.

At the very end of his life, through his personal theology, Twain would finally discover peace and a rational justification for his belief in the immortality of the soul. His creative consciousness, his *thought*, would soon be free to explore the ends of the universe. His irascible humor was also with him to the very end. Just two weeks before his death, bedridden and aware of his pending demise, he wrote the following advice on proper deportment in Heaven to Albert Bigelow Paine:

Upon arrival, do not speak to St. Peter until spoken to. It is not your place to begin.

Do not begin any remark with "Say."

When applying for a ticket, avoid trying to make conversation. If you *must* talk, let the weather alone. St. Peter cares not a damn for the weather. And don't ask him what time the 4:30 train goes; there aren't any trains in Heaven, except through trains, and the less information you get about those the better for you.

Don't try to photograph him. Hell is full of people who made that mistake.

Leave your dog outside. Heaven goes by favor. If it went by merit, you would stay outside and the dog would go in.

You will be wanting to slip down at night and smuggle water to the infant damned, but don't you try it. You would be caught and nobody in Heaven would respect you after that.

Explain to your wife why I don't come. If you can. (*MTB* III: 1566-67)

Twain could accept that he might be wrong about all he had written and thought, and that he might end up in Hell, through no fault of his own, but that indomitable spirit would choose to enter Heaven on his own terms – or not at all. On April 21, 1910, Twain lay in the big, four-poster bed that had been his and Livy's sanctuary from the world. A little before noon, he sent for Paine. "When Paine arrived, Twain indicated a pair of unfinished manuscripts and whispered, "throw away," and pressed Paine's hand" (Powers 627).

Twain moved in and out of consciousness throughout the day, but finally awoke one last time in the early afternoon and took the hand of his last living child, Clara, and told her “Good-bye.” And then the man who had the temerity and the spirit to challenge God, faded from the physical world forever, to become nothing less than a *thought*.

END NOTES

Introduction

1. For the purpose of this thesis, I will refer to Samuel Clemens as Mark Twain throughout, regardless of age, relationship or experience. This decision is merely to avoid the potential for confusion that might arise from switching back and forth between the two names or from the difficulties of attempting to discuss Samuel Clemens the man versus Mark Twain the writer. In many cases, it is almost impossible to distinguish between the two.

2. *Theodicy* was first introduced by the German philosopher Gottfried Leibnitz in his work “*Essais de Théodicée sur la bonté de Dieu, la liberté de l'homme et l'origine du mal*” (Essay of Theodicy on the Benevolence of God, the Free Will of Man, and the Origin of Evil). In lay terms, Theodicy argues that God is fundamentally good despite the presence of evil in the world that he created, and despite that presence, the Earth is still the best of all possible worlds.

3. *Regula fidei*, or Rule of Faith, is the Christian tenet that all things must be measured in terms of what is already believed and written in Christian ideology, that is, all things must be measured against the writings in the Bible for Protestants, or against the Bible and Church doctrine for Catholics.

4. Late in Jane's life, her son asked her about his first days in Florida, Missouri: "I suppose that during all that time you were uneasy about me?" "Yes, the whole time." And then, in a game of wit that Twain and his mother loved playing throughout their adult relationship, Twain asked her, "Afraid I wouldn't live?" After a long pause for reflection, she replied: "No, afraid you would" (Wecter 44).

5. Double predestination is the Calvinist viewpoint that God has foreordained those souls who are the "elect" of heaven, and condemned all others to eternal damnation. Under this belief, all followers must be good and cultivate strong moral values on the off chance that God has selected you.

CHAPTER I

1. A mud-clerk's primary job was wading to shore and back between the steamboat and goods, packages and passengers waiting to be picked up by the Steamboat whenever it stopped at a village or other site that had no docks. It was the lowest position on a steamboat, but was also the only entry-level position. It was unpaid except for meals and lodging on the vessel.

2. Twain was actually apprenticed to the pilot Horace Bixby on the packet *Crescent City*, but was on loan to Brown and the *Pennsylvania*. The exact reasons for this are unrecorded, but it doesn't seem to have been an unusual situation.

3. For a thorough account of the *Pennsylvania* explosion, see Edgar Marquess Branch's excellent work *Men Call Me Lucky: Mark Twain and the Pennsylvania*.

CHAPTER II

1. The other two “Hellhags,” according to Powers were Twain’s friend Mary Fairbanks and his mother Jane Clemens.
2. This is a reference to Mark 5:13 “And the unclean spirits went out, and entered into the swine: and the herd ran violently down a steep place into the sea, they were about two thousand; and were choked in the sea.”
3. In addition to proclaiming his determination to become a Christian to Livy, Twain also wrote to Mary Fairbanks that “I shall be a Christian,” to his sister Pamela that he would marry Livy “when I am a Christian,” and to Jervis Langdon, Livy’s father, that “men as lost as I have found a Savior, and why not I?” (*MTL* II: 284, II: 295, II: 359)

CHAPTER III

1. Lecky’s work was an extension of Thomas Paine’s Deist philosophies. The primary difference, and of particular interest to Twain, was Lecky’s focus on the development of an intuitive moral sense that exists from the moment of consciousness. Twain would begin a correspondence with Lecky and develop a friendship with him.
2. Not in Twain’s opinion, however. Twain considered *The Recollections of Joan of Arc* to be his best work. He originally published it anonymously because he feared readers would let his reputation as a humorist color their evaluation of its message. Twain wrote to Albert Paine in 1908: “I like *Joan of Arc* best of all my books; and it is the best; I know it perfectly well” (*MTB* II:1034).
3. *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* was not a great seller for Twain originally. It sold only 15,000 copies in its opening weeks, and after a year, sales still languished at around

27,000. *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, by contrast, sold 39,000 copies in the first month and cleared more than 50,000 copies by the second month.

CHAPTER IV

1. Jean Clemens suffered from epilepsy. On Christmas morning, 1909, she suffered a seizure in the bathtub and slipped under the water. She was twenty-nine. Twain was left only with his daughter Clara, who had married earlier in the year. After the death of so many loved ones, however, Twain had finally begun to incorporate it into his own religious philosophy. “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 a bitterness, but I am content: for she has been enriched with the most precious of all gifts...death” (Powers 626).

2. Where Twain took the name 44 is unknown. Some speculate it is a play of words based on his childhood friends, a set of twins whose last name was Levin. “Twice Levin” is 22. Twice 22 is 44. It might also mean Twain (11), twice doubled.

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VITA

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