Mark Twain's Choice

The Pain Behind the Laughter

William D. Fitts

In the summer of 1907, Oxford University conferred honorary doctorates upon five artists. The list included the English poet and storyteller Rudyard Kipling, founder and first general of the Salvation Army William Booth, the French sculptor Auguste Rodin, and composer Camille Saint-Saëns. However, the student body broke into its most enthusiastic applause when Lord Curzon introduced the honoree from the United States of America: "Most jocund, pleasant and humorous man, who shakes the sides of all the circuit of the earth with your native joyousness, I by my authority and that of the entire university, admit you to the honorary degree of Doctor of Letters."[1]

The picture of Mark Twain that the university audience saw that day, with his doctoral robe and mortarboard, was indeed one of joyousness. However, few in that audience knew that behind the snow-white mustache and mane was a mind clouded by gloom, the immediate causes of which had been the death of his favorite daughter Susy to meningitis, the diagnosis of his youngest daughter with epilepsy, and the loss of his wife Olivia to heart disease. The causes of the darkness in Mark Twain's soul, however, had been building since he had come into the world with Halley's Comet some 70 years before.

Early Influences

Samuel Langhorne Clemens came from a home spiritually divided. Clemens said that his father, a respected but unsuccessful country storekeeper, "went to church—once; never again." His son later remarked that the agnostic John Clemens showed affection only once in his life, when he kissed his daughter Pamela on his deathbed. Secretly witnessing the autopsy performed on the father may have affected the boy's attitude toward the spiritual as well. Sam was only 12 years old when his father died.[2]

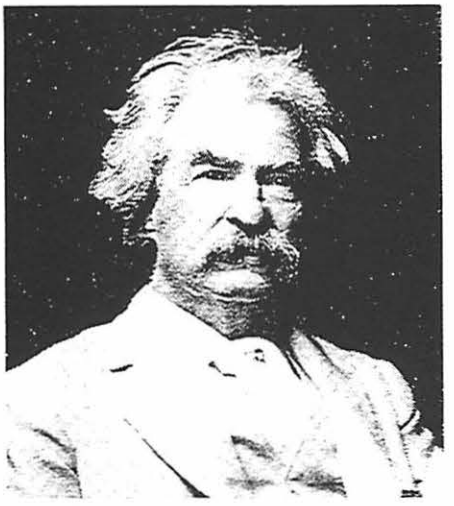
Nor did he remember his mother and father ever being affectionate. She had quarreled with a man she loved and had married John Clemens on the rebound. The family lived "on the edge of their nerves." His mother was a hypochondriac who indulged in patent medicines. Her strongly Calvinistic background probably damaged the boy's spirit more than anything else. Early Bible lessons and Sunday school taught him that individualism was to be punished as sin. As Van Wyck Brooks wrote,

> Calvinism itself had gone to seed [in the Midwest]: it was nothing but the dead hand of custom; the flaming priest had long since given way to the hysterical evangelist [whom Mark Twain would later satirize in works like *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*]. Grope as he might, he could find nowhere, either in men or in books, the bread and wine of the spirit.[3]

Sam's mother made him promise on his father's deathbed to be a good boy. That night he began sleepwalking. When he later left home, she made him promise not to drink, use tobacco, or gamble. He seemed under her spell. Since he early established himself as the breadwinner for the family, he was caught in the conflict between creativity and the convention that her Calvinism demanded of him. He thus developed early a dual personality—one to please his demanding mother and the other in which he could explore his individualism and creativity.[4]

Tremendous feelings of guilt arose in the young Clemens when he saw his failings through the Calvinist eyes inherited from his mother. On one occasion he gave some matches to a drunken tramp so that he could smoke in the Hannibal jail. The tramp set fire to the cell and burned to death. Clemens blamed himself for the tramp's death.[5]

In Clemens' youth were sown the seeds of his later misanthropy. He met only one really thinking soul, a malcontent Scotchman named Macfarlane, who described man as the only bad apple in the animal kingdom.[6] This negativism about humanity would dominate much of Clemens' later writing, from *The Tragedy of Pudd'nhead Wilson* to *What Is Man?* and *Letters From the Earth*.



Mark Twain (1835–1910)

Illustrations: The Bettmann Archive

Clemens escaped his guilt temporarily as a cub pilot on the Mississippi River. His attraction for the river boat pilots was undoubtedly due in part to their freedom and energy. However, his brother Henry was terribly burned when the steamboat *Pennsylvania* exploded near Memphis. After being given a dose of morphine Henry died. Already established as the family breadwinner, Clemens felt somehow responsible for his younger brother's death.[7]

During his early adult years, Clemens went to Nevada with his brother Orion. Here again the pressure to make a fortune for the family, especially his mother, played on his conscience. When he discovered that he was not cut out to be a miner, he turned to writing. This too had its drawbacks, for the sensitive Clemens became the butt of many practical jokes played by the miners. This wounded and angered him. The pressure to conform to the mining camp mentality stifled his creativity. To write was "a sin in the eyes of his mother and a shame in the eyes of society." His biographer Albert Bigelow Paine described him as moody. One comrade recalled, "He was the life of the camp, but sometimes there would come a reaction and he would hardly speak for a day or two." Clemens signed his early goldfield pieces "Josh" out of fear that the miners would crucify him for writing "literature."[8]

Samuel Clemens the miner and would-be writer thus carried a heavy spiritual burden into his adult years. Reading Robert Ingersoll during this time certainly did not lighten his load. Ingersoll may have released Clemens from the superstition and bigotry that he satirized in *Huckleberry Finn* and came to dislike in Harriet Beecher Stowe, but it apparently did not provide him the rest that his soul was seeking. In San Francisco he became so depressed due to his mother's (and his own) pressure to make his fortune and leave writing that he put a gun to his head. However, he did not have the nerve to pull the trigger.[9]

The Struggle to Believe

For the remainder of his life, Samuel Clemens would struggle with Christianity and the Bible due to his early experiences. He told the minister Joseph Twichell, "I don't believe one word of your Bible was inspired by God any more than any other book. I believe it is entirely the work of man from beginning to end—atonement and all."[10] Yet this is the same man who also wrote,

> It is hard to make a choice of the most beautiful passage in a book which is so gemmed with beautiful passages as the Bible. . . . Who taught those ancient writers their simplicity of language, their pathos, and, above all, their faculty of sinking themselves entirely out of sight of the reader and making the narrative stand out alone and seem to tell itself?[11]

His question reveals the torment of much of 19th century America—caught between conventional Christianity and the thinking emerging during that period.

Mark Twain with his beloved daughters.

What were the specific results of Clemens' spiritual torment on his family? In a letter to Olivia Langdon shortly before their engagement, he said that "the emotion, the revealing religious emotion, Livy, *will not* come. . . . I pray for it—it is all I can do. I know not how to compel an emotion."[12] He made vain attempts early in their marriage to cooperate with her Christian faith, saying on one occasion, "I believe in you even as I believe in the Savior."[13] He even attended church, wrote an emotional meditation on the Nativity, indicated that he might write a life of Christ, and signed a love letter to her with "Good-by—with a kiss of reverent affection — and — Hebrews XIII, 20."[14] This religious conviction did not last long, however.

Clemens soon went back on his word to his wife not to drink or smoke—pattern he had already established when out of sight of his mother. Now he openly defied others' requests. As he later admitted, he ended up eroding Olivia's Christianity—"almost the only crime of my life which causes me bitterness now."[15]

Family Pain

It is a truism that the real character of a person surfaces during times of suffering, and this was the case with Mark Twain. In 1872, when the family lost a son, Langdon, at 19 months, he turned more and more inward. His growing disillusionment was compounded by deterministic thinking. "The Book of Nature tells us distinctly that God cares not a rap for us—nor for any living creature. . . . The Law of Distribution of Comfort and Pain shows an entire absence of sentimental justice," he

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wrote.[16] He believed that the Bible borrowed the Golden Rule from Confucius, the Immaculate Conception from Egypt, the Hindus, Greeks, and Rome.[17] He rejected belief in "the divinity of the Savior."[18]

During this time, Olivia was diagnosed as having acute hyperthyroid heart disease. His daughters feared his outbreaks of temper during her decline. His daughter Jean's personality changed, and she was diagnosed as an epileptic. He worshiped his daughter Susy, away at Bryn Mawr. Like his mother, he demanded perfectionism in the home. With the failure of his invention, the Paige typesetting machine, his creditors were hounding him. Under all this pressure, he sometimes reminded Olivia of his lack of belief in a future life, which greatly distressed her. William Dean Howells recalls how Clemens later told his wife that he had been "thinking the whole matter over, and now he was convinced that the soul did live after death. It was too late. Her keen vision pierced through his ruse."[19]

When Susy died from meningitis in 1896, Clemens' railing increased. The early guilt returned. He wrote *What Is Man?*—his "Bible,"—decidedly deterministic in nature—and *Following the Equator*. "We ignore and never mention the Sole Impulse which dictates and compels a man's every act," he wrote. Man "is never anything but what his outside influences have made him.... Pity is for the living, envy is for the dead." Olivia would not listen tohim read the last half of *What Is Man?*,[20] and he turned more inward.[20] Finally, her doctors *and she* restricted him to five minutes a day with her, identifying him as "a chief factor in the acute nervous states of exhaustion and distress that went along with the hyperthyroid heart disease."

Clemens became more negative in *The Mysterious Stranger*, writing, "There is no God, no universe, no human race, no earthly life, 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!"[21]

On June 5, 1904, Olivia died, and Clemens' guilt became almost unbearable. He recalled how her faith in God had grown cold during the final years. He remembered how, earlier in their marriage, she had suffered over his reluctance to take communion and how she had remained at the church to pray for them both. He recalled how, when they had stopped attending church, she had told him, "Well, if you are to be lost, I want to be lost with you." He remembered how he had once told her to lean on her faith if it would comfort her. She had replied, "I can't, Youth. I haven't any." And he moaned, "I took Livy's religion away from her, and gave her nothing—in return. I gave her alarm."[22]

The Choice

Samuel Clemens finally found his own release on April 21, 1910. Like his father, he had become an agnostic and anticleric. Like his mother, he had become a demanding perfectionist, running his own household in the final years "on the edge of their nerves." But was Clemens simply illustrative of the determinism that many of his fellow writers advocated in 19th century America? As an adult, did he not have the freedom to choose the reading material that would help shape his world view? Did he not have the choice among his mother's Calvinism (and frontier emotionalism), his father and Ingersoll's agnosticism, Olivia's faith (which again, he seems to have identified with emotionalism) and, finally, a seeking after God with all his heart? God's promise is unequivocal: "You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart."[23]

Mark Twain's last words to his daughter Clara were, "Goodbye dear, if we meet . . ." The crux of Mark Twain's tragedy may be found in that final *if*.◦

NOTES

1. Hamlin Hill, *Mark Twain: God's Fool* (New York: Harper-Colophon, 1973), p. 175.
2. Justin Kaplan, *Mark Twain and His World* (London: Michael Joseph, 1974), pp. 14-16.
3. Van Wyck Brooks, *The Ordeal of Mark Twain*, rev. ed. (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1920), pp. 30, 37.
4. Brooks, *op. cit.*, pp. 40-43.
5. Kaplan, *op. cit.*, pp. 24, 160, 161.
6. Brooks, *op. cit.*, p. 38.
7. Kaplan, *op. cit.*, p. 37.
8. Brooks, *op. cit.*, pp. 77-81.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 86.
10. Albert Bigelow Paine, *Mark Twain, a Biography: The Personal and Literary Life of Samuel Langhorne Clemens* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1912), vol. 2, p. 631.
11. Carolyn Harnsberger, *Mark Twain's Views of Religion* (Evanston, Ill.: Schori, 1961), p. 12.
12. Letter, January 2, 1869, in Carolyn Harnsberger, *Mark Twain, Family* Man (New York: Citadel, 1960), p. 58.
13. Kaplan, *op. cit.*, p. 81.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 82.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 83.
16. Albert Bigelow Paine, *Mark Twain's Notebook* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1935), p. 360.
17. Harnsberger, *op. cit.*, pp. 24, 25.
18. Albert Bigelow Paine, *Mark Twain's Letters* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1917), vol. 2, p. 323.
19. William Dean Howells, *My Mark Twain: Reminiscences and Criticisms* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1910), p. 32.
20. Kaplan, *op. cit.*, pp. 165, 166.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 172.
22. Harnsberger, *Views*, pp. 15, 16.
23. Jeremiah 29:13, NIV.

William D. Fitts (Ph.D., Texas A & M University) is a professor of English at Union College, in Lincoln, Nebraska, U.S.A.