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**“Everybody drinks Water”:
Mark Twain’s Critique of Social Darwinism**

Sarah Vales
Senior Honors
4/19/04

“Everybody drinks Water”:
Mark Twain’s Critique of Social Darwinism

*“Creed and opinion change with time, and their symbols perish;
but Literature and its temples are sacred to all creeds and inviolate.”*

- Mark Twain¹

*“The only very marked difference between the average civilized man and
the average savage is that the one is gilded and the other is painted.”*

- Mark Twain²

Mark Twain speaks in the first quote above about the power of literature, the effects of which Twain would have lived and breathed as a prominent Realist writer. In the second quotation, he comments on the true equality of humankind masked by glorified social definitions. The second quote confronts the theory of social Darwinism, defined by the phrase “survival of the fittest,” and growing popular during the life of Twain. Twain does more, however, than give eloquence to the two declarations. He employs the power of literature as an attack on social Darwinism.

Mark Twain wrote during the time period from approximately 1860 to 1900, commonly known as the Gilded Age. Change defined these years as America industrialized, urbanized, and expanded. Along with the change came an array of social problems, which produced a dichotomy between the outward success of the changes and the inward turmoil wrought on society.

¹ Mark Twain, Letter to the Millicent [Rogers] Library, 2/22/1894, found in Paul Fatout, ed., *Mark Twain Speaks for Himself* (West LaFayette: Purdue University Press, 1978), 147.

² Twain, Notebook, n.d., found at www.twainquotes.com. The web site used is a valid invaluable source of compiled by Barbara Schmidt and Dave Thomson. Dave Thomson is an honorary member of the Mark Twain Home foundation Board of Hannibal, Missouri, writes book and media reviews for the Mark Twain Forum, and co-authored, *Hannibal Heritage* (Missouri: Heritage House Publishing, 2003). The web site claims that “quotations in this online collection are not available in any other format except the original.

The golden façade hid harsh working and living conditions. Industrialization brought large factories to areas near natural resources and the areas grew into large urban cities. These cities were overcrowded and havens for corruption under the rule of political bosses such as the famous Boss Tweed. People in the cities fought for jobs, as mass production turned skilled workers into unskilled, and therefore expendable, employees. Immigration increased rapidly during this time as foreigners sought the wealth of America. The addition of immigrants in large droves created an even greater surplus of workers as well as people living in a small area. The surplus led to harsher working conditions due to the fact that naïve immigrants were even easier to exploit and served as useful competition for preexisting workers. The addition of ethnic hostility only added to racism left over from the Civil War. Racism of all kinds made it easier as well for the United States, fueled by success, growth, and competition, to seek the role as an imperialist nation by conquering other countries and territories. The problems of the Gilded Age all questioned humankind's place in a rapidly changing society.

Not every American suffered from the problems of industrialization during the Gilded Age. Owners or investors in big businesses clearly had the upper hand, and held it way above the heads of those who made the wheels turn. For a few, the Gilded Age meant prosperity, progress, and wealth in a way no one in the world had ever known before. In 1889, seven-tenths of the national wealth belonged to one three-hundredths of the people.³ After acquiring the means of obtaining such riches, it was only natural that this faction of Americans strove to keep their new lives. In order to do so, they had to

³ Mark Wahlgren Summers, *The Gilded Age or the Hazard of New Functions* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1997), 122.

look for a justification to explain the problems that were peaking through the gilded cover of success.

Many of the elite faction of America found this justification in social Darwinism and used the social theory to excuse the exploitation of workers, the poor living conditions, the corruption, racism, imperialism, and the general use of other's failures to promote progress.

Social Darwinism applies the evolutionary theory of Darwin to humankind using catch phrases such as "struggle for existence," and "survival of the fittest," to define its purposes.⁴ The application suggests that when left to progress at will, nature will provide for the best competitors, the naturally fit, resulting in continued improvement of society. A society governed by social Darwinism would reject laws for the poor, state-supported education, regulation of housing conditions, tariffs, state banking, reform, and even "state protection from medical quacks."⁵ Herbert Spencer first coined the term "social Darwinism" in a series of volumes titled the *Synthetic Philosophy*.⁶ Social Darwinism was originally an English idea, but became incredibly popular among Americans. Spencer's books in America from their earliest publication in the 1860s till the end of 1903 totaled 368,755 volumes not taking into account the circulation of items owned by libraries.⁷ Henry Ward Beecher writes to Herbert Spencer in 1866, "The peculiar condition of American Society has made your writings far more fruitful and quickening here than in Europe."⁸ Beecher's statement solidifies the fact that in America, social Darwinism had become more than a social theory, it had become a practiced justification

⁴ Richard Hofstadter, *Social Darwinism in American Thought* (New York: George Braziller, Inc., 1959), 6.

⁵ Ibid., 41.

⁶ Summers, *The Gilded Age*, 125.

⁷ Hofstadter, *Social Darwinism*, 35.

for a new way of life enjoyed by laissez-faire conservatives who preferred political status quo and unrestrained capitalism.

Though social Darwinism was based largely on a tenet of competition, as a theory, it received little intellectual competition. Richard Hofstadter describes its popularity in his book *Social Darwinism in American Thought* writing, “it was seized upon as a welcome addition, perhaps the most powerful of all . . . and for many long years dissenters represented a minority point of view.”⁹ The difficulty in speaking against social Darwinism was that any theoretical dissent only fell on the ears of those who controlled intellectual thought, and in the Gilded Age, those who controlled social and especially economic opinion usually favored social Darwinism. Successfully confronting social Darwinism, therefore, did not involve one theory criticizing the other, or even a realization that the problems inflicted on society were a direct result of the theory. A counter-attack would have to convincingly illuminate the fault of justifying social problems with social Darwinism in a way that turned to democracy and spoke to the people, was for the people and, as the Constitution suggests, by the people.

Truly victorious objection to social Darwinism did not come from writers and thinkers who earned places in the history of intellectual thought, and was not written about by scholars such as Hofstadter. Opposition came instead from Twain, whose brand of Realist literature served as a critique of social Darwinism allowing Twain to do more than reshape literature. Shirking off styles of romance, which reflected surroundings, Twain took an active role in society. Twain’s Realist literature served as a critique of social Darwinism by empowering the voice of the public in a way that refused the gap

⁸ Ibid., 31.

⁹ Ibid., 6.

between poor and elite and attempted to hinder the social Darwinism that threatened to take the democratic voice away.

Mark Twain is famous for his quick wit, sarcastic style and critical humor, all which have made him a staple in American history and American literature. Like the society he lived in and named, his captious works, gilded in comedy, are not what they seem on the outside. The antics of Mark Twain's Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn, two of Twain's most popular and widely read characters, provided laughs as the boys found adventure, but they also brought up topics of race, government, and civilization. Even more telling than his novels are his many quips and quirks found in his letters and notebooks filled with puns and twists to add the appropriate bite and emphasize a specific lesson.¹⁰ Ernest Hemingway writes of Twain's work, "for perhaps the first time in America, the vivid raw, not-so-respectable voice of the common folk was used to create great literature."¹¹ Mark Twain was the common man's champion and his position set the stage for an attack on social Darwinism.

The amount and style of Twain's work has made him a man of frequent study both in his time and currently.¹² Interpretations and opinions of Mark Twain vary, and

¹⁰ I found many volumes containing Mark Twain's letters, notebooks and journals. In order to make my search more manageable I chose to focus on his notebooks and journals rather than his letters. When I did research letters, I picked his letters to institutions or fellow writers such as William Howells rather than personal letters. I found that what he wrote in his notebooks was much more relevant to this study than what he covered in his personal letters, so I eliminated them in my search, though I did enjoy his attempt to justify smoking to his wife.

¹¹ Bob Frost, "Mark Twain, American Treasure, American Tragedy," *Biography Magazine* (October 2002): 63.

¹² I recommend: Louis J. Budd, *Mark Twain: Social Philosopher*, (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2001), David R. Sewell, *Mark Twain's Languages: Discourse, Dialogue, and Linguistic Variety* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), Henry Nash Smith, *Mark Twain: The Development of a Writer* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1962), Louis J. Budd, *Critical Essays on Mark Twain, 1867-1910* (Boston: G.K. Hall & Co., 1982), Guy Cardwell, *The Man who was Mark Twain, Images and Ideologies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), and Albert Bigelow Paine, *A Short Life of Mark Twain* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1920) as a good selection of commentary/analysis of Twain and his works spanning the decades and including those who have made

some even directly contradict each other. Differences in study are partly do to the nature of interpretation, but also are the result of a changing man. Mark Twain grew and changed as a writer just as his era did, and his era was very important to Twain. In *Mark Twain and his Times: A Bicentennial Appreciation* Arthur Pettit writes, “If we are to measure Mark Twain’s full importance to his times, we must play his life and personality against the backdrop of the mind and mood of nineteenth-century America.”¹³ He continues, noting that “The Gilded Age had its prophets of pessimism as well as its preachers of progress-and no man served both camps more feverishly than Mark Twain.”¹⁴

The Gilded Age itself was a matter for confusion and by serving as its spokesman, Twain often suffered the consequences. Mark Twain was “a man of many faces who never achieved a unified personality ... he was a great tangle of tensions and dualities.”¹⁵ His dual nature reflected a dual layer in each of his works and sayings. He was not only writing a story, he was revealing the problems of society, and criticizing social Darwinism.

The dual layer highlighted by critics and telltale to his works, was a layer of power. While at times, Mark Twain was direct about his social views, such as his statement in a letter, “I don’t want to abuse a man’s civility merely because he gives me the chance,” Twain usually directed his comments with an indirect punch.¹⁶ Such an

Mark Twain a life times study. Though not cited, all were used in part in this study to gain a sense of the Twain.

¹³ Arthur G. Pettit, “Mark Twain and His Times: A Bicentennial Appreciation,” *The South Atlantic Quarterly* (1977): 138.

¹⁴ Ibid., 140.

¹⁵ Ibid., 138.

¹⁶ Twain, Letter to Thomas Bailey Aldrich, 1/27/1871, Buffalo, New York, in Victor Fischer, ed., *Mark Twain’s Letters*, vol. 4, 1870-1871 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 316.

example occurs in his letter, “Mark Twain as a Presidential Candidate,” which mocks what would happen if Twain ran for president. He writes,

I admit also that I am not a friend of the poor man. I regard the poor man, in his present condition, as so much wasted raw material. Cut up and properly canned, he might be made useful to fatten the natives of the cannibal islands and to improve our export trade in that region. I shall recommend legislation upon the subject in my first message. My campaign cry will be: “Desiccate the poor working-man; stuff him into sausages.”¹⁷

Mark Twain’s multiple layers in the excerpt satirize not only politicians’ treatment of the common man, but also call upon Jonathan Swift’s famous satire in order to drive home his message.¹⁸ Twain’s works cannot and should not be read at face value. Twain himself declared the importance of looking beyond what is explicitly written in a text. In a letter to H. H. Rogers he wrote, “A successful book is not made of what is in it, but what is left out of it.”¹⁹ Twain knew there was deeper significance to his works than his fictitious plots and obvious exposure of practical problems. He knew the power of inference. Twain’s best comments expose the flaws of society by being gilded themselves. Not only what he says, but how he says it is integral when examining Mark Twain’s works in order to illuminate Twain’s critique of social Darwinism.

Of all his works, one of his most obvious critiques of society is the book that bears the name of the age, *The Gilded Age*. Mark Twain reveals many of society’s hidden problems in the novel, which attacks the age directly while relaying his ever pressing message that things are not what they seem. The novel was a joint effort of Twain and Charles Dudley Warner written in four months with the aim of as Twain said,

¹⁷ Twain, “Mark Twain As Presidential Candidate,” New York *Evening Post*, 6/9/1879, in Fatout, ed., *Mark Twain*, 117.

¹⁸ I see an allusion to Jonathan Swift’s “A Modest Proposal,” 1729, where he suggests, satirically that the Irish eat their own children.

“satirizing “speculativeness” in business and “shameful corruption” in politics.”²⁰ *The Gilded Age* is in many ways a simple character analysis of the make up of Gilded Age society. Its most famous character, the boisterous Colonel Sellers declares, “The whole country is opening up, all we want is capital to develop it.”²¹ Sellers expresses a giddiness in the belief that everyone will have a chance to take part in the success of the Gilded Age. Twain’s point is that Sellers has misconstrued the situation. Ellen Goldner claims that the characters, such as Sellers, of *The Gilded Age* “preview the dissolution of the subject, who, caught within multiple and shifting interdependencies, loses his position as privileged observer who stands outside the events he views.”²² Her examination shows that the characters of *The Gilded Age* are members of a society who have lost all means of control and are unable to “stand outside” to recognize and separate themselves from the despair of the Gilded Age. They are only tools of those in power.

Jerry O’Brien expresses a similar thought with his disclosure of a theme of “false hope” in his essay “Everybody Chases Butterflies,” which is the “unity of purpose and design” of *The Gilded Age*.²³ In the novel, no one is immune from the “fever of speculation.”²⁴ The poor are “dull-witted and boorish, the rich are unscrupulous and petty, society is corrupt and politics is the occupation of the greedy and the treacherous.”²⁵ Readers have looked to *The Gilded Age* repeatedly as an attack on

¹⁹ Twain, Letter to H. H. Rogers, 5/1897,

²⁰ Twain quoted in Charles W. Calhoun, ed., *The Gilded Age: Essays on the Origins of Modern America* (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources Inc., 2000), introduction.

²¹ Twain and Charles Dudley Warner, *The Gilded Age: A Tale of To-Day* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1873), 107.

²² Ellen J. Goldner, “Tangled Webs: Lies, Capitalist Expansion, and the Dissolution of the Subject in *The Gilded Age*,” *Arizona Quarterly* 49 (Autumn 1993): 64.

²³ Jerry O’Brien, “ ‘Everybody Chases Butterflies’: The Theme of False Hope in *The Gilded Age*,” *Journal of American Culture* 6 (1983): 69.

²⁴ O’Brien, “Everybody Chases Butterflies,” 69.

²⁵ Ibid.

corruption and greed. While pointing out the problems of the Gilded Age, the novel also indirectly attributes them to social Darwinistic trends. O'Brien writes that the characters all undergo a quest, for either wealth or love, and the quests are "closely linked to the desire for a higher social position."²⁶ In the novel, Twain works in this "quest to be the best" with a theme of false hope suggesting that the Gilded Age society does not offer a way for one to better social position, but rather claims to in order for the greedy to guiltlessly further their wealth. Members of society do not see the truth because they are "disillusioned" and instructed by the tenets of social Darwinism.

The idea that mankind can naturally rise up by taking opportunities was the topic of Horatio Alger's well-known success story. Twain parodies the "rags to riches" tale in "Poor little Stephen Girard."²⁷ He tells a story of a boy who, having read a fable, hopes that one day, he too will become rich if he just keeps picking up the pins outside of a bank. However, rather than meeting the bank owner who will give him a job and offer his daughters hand in marriage as the boy's fable suggested, the boy comes face to face with a bank owner who grabs the pins and yells, "Those pins belong to the bank, and if I catch you hanging around here anymore I'll set the dog on you."²⁸ Twain's Realist portrayal of the bank owner shows him as a greedy man bursting the boy's hopes of becoming rich as the Alger story foreshadows. Critics view this satire as a reversal of and attack on Alger's tale, which it undoubtedly is.²⁹ It is also a reflection on social Darwinism. Social Darwinism was a justification for success achieved at the expense of others. Some social Darwinists were blatant in their belief that it is a "dog eat dog"

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Twain, "Poor Little Stephen Girard," in Leon Fink, ed., *Major Problems in the Gilded Age and the Progressive Era* (Lexington: D.C. Heath and Company, 1993).

²⁸ Ibid., 12.

world, while others tried to soften their justification by creating “success” stories. Alger’s tale is a euphemism for the realities of what it takes to be successful in society and one which is used as a justification for those who in reality use means of social Darwinism to achieve great heights. Twain attacks the euphemism with a story of his own.

During the Gilded Age, covetous Americans also used Social Darwinism as a justification for imperialism. Once again, some imperialists tried to sugar coat their motives by claiming they were teachers, needed to rescue the uneducated, while others spoke outright about the US’s superiority. Senator Albert Beveridge represents the later and defends U.S. imperialism over the Philippines in 1900 with statements such as “the common people in their stupidity are like their caribou bulls.”³⁰ Taking over foreign countries, to Beveridge, was not a question of politics or constitutional power. To him, “it is racial ... we are master organizers of the world to establish system where chaos reigns.”³¹ If the United States is stronger, then the country may and should “administer government among savage and senile peoples.”³² On many accounts Twain scolds all ideas of imperialism. He states, “The first thing a missionary teaches the savage is indecency.”³³ Twain is not just chiding imperialism, but also the idea that one civilization is better than another, and that imperialism is merely “teaching” other societies how to be better. To Twain, the missionaries do not teach, they are only greedy wealth seekers who use “savages” as steps to personal greatness and justify their wealth with the social Darwinistic idea that they are naturally better.

²⁹ Leon Fink, ed., *Major Problems in the Gilded Age and the Progressive Era* (Lexington: D.C. Heath and Company, 1993), 2.

³⁰ Albert Beveridge, (1900) document compiled by Leon Fink, ed., *Major Problems in the Gilded Age and the Progressive Era* (Lexington: D.C. Heath and Company, 1993), 496.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

Twain believes that imperialism and the “international” social Darwinian view that America could do what the nation pleases purely because they could, resulted in a polluting of democracy. Taking away the freedoms of others simply out of greed is an idea in direct conflict with the founding democratic principles of the country. Twain re-writes *The Battle Hymn of the Republic* as seen here to express a disgust for those who use democracy in menacing ways and eventually destroy it:

Mine eyes have seen the orgy of the launching of the Sword;
He is searching out the hoardings where the stranger's wealth is stored;
He hath loosed his fateful lightnings, and with woe and death has scored;
His lust is marching on.³⁴

In another instance, Twain writes, “I am an anti-imperialist. I am opposed to having the eagle put its talons on any other land.”³⁵ Here Twain depicts the imperialistic form of democracy as a menacing bird preying on other lands. This is not the democracy of which America should be proud.

Racism abroad as a social Darwinistic justification of the misuse of democracy was perhaps easier for Americans to swallow since the country was still shedding beliefs of racial inequality from the Civil War. The idea remained that all people were not alike. To many, “savages” did not just exist in other civilizations, but in the south as well. In a number of his books, Twain tackles the race issue, pointing out the troubles, both societal and emotional of slavery. Twain’s objections to social Darwinism are strongest in relation to situations involving racism and his texts are filled not just with plot but with opinion.

³³ Twain, Notebook, 1897, in Albert Paine ed., *Mark Twain's Notebook* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1971), 302.

³⁴ Twain, “The Battle Hymn of the Republic”, (1901) read at <http://users.erols.com/kmdavis/gb2a.html>

³⁵ Twain, quoted in *A Pen Warmed Up in Hell*, www.twainquotes.com

For example, his book *The Tragedy of Pudd'nhead Wilson* explores the basic racial themes of inequality and slave life in one of three strands in the novel while making specific points about the falseness of social Darwinism.³⁶ The plot involves Roxy, a light skinned slave who switches her son with the slave owner's son in order to save him from the evils of slavery. Twain sets up the plot as a critique on social Darwinism discussing the exchange of roles in the beginning of the novel. He writes,

by the fiction created by herself, he was become her master, the necessity of recognizing this relation outwardly and of perfecting herself in the forms required to express the recognition, had moved her to such diligence and faithfulness in practicing these forms that this exercise soon concreted itself into habit; it became automatic and unconscious.³⁷

Nurture is so powerful that it can even undo the natural state of motherhood. Nurture can make a man into a completely different person. Roxy's own son becomes her master. Her son does not see her as a mother or feel a connection. After years of habit, even Roxy, aware of the switch, only sees the man she gave birth to as a master. One's role in society is not based on nature as social Darwinism suggests, but rather on nurture.

The story line after the switch traces the lives of the two boys. "Tom," really a slave with the birth name Chambers, grows up a wealthy white man. He has gambling problems that eventually cause him to sell his real slave mother and murder his thought to be uncle. In investigating the murder, a lawyer (Pudd'nhead Wilson) uncovers fingerprints and discovers the switch. The twins are then switched back but "Chambers," really Tom, cannot find a place in society after being raised as a slave. Twain humorizes the issue of nature vs. nurture with the twins and clearly believes that it is not nature that makes a man but rather nurture. The wise character Pudd'nhead Wilson, states, "training

³⁶ Twain, *The Tragedy of Pudd'nhead Wilson* (Hartford: American Publishing Company, 1894).

³⁷ Twain, *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, 19.

is everything. The peach was once a bitter almond; cauliflower is nothing but cabbage with a college education.”³⁸ Pudd’nhead Wilson himself reflects Twain’s point. He is the wise traveler who solves the problems of the plot and yet he is unsophisticated, unrefined, and named “Pudd’nhead Wilson,”-which not only suggests that his head is filled with pudding but that he is a “wilson,” a common name shared by many.

A man is the product of his environment, and not only that, but the “civilized” environment of the wealthy who would choose to own other people for their benefit, produces the worst products as indicated by “Tom.” If nature was responsible for people’s place in society then such a switch would not have been possible and “Chambers” would be able to take his place in society. Instead, both men struggle. “Chambers,” “could neither read nor write, and his speech was the basest dialect of the negro quarter...money and fine clothes could not mend these defects or cover them up, they only made them more glaring and the more pathetic.”³⁹ “Tom” was sentenced to prison, but pardoned because he was really property and then promptly sold down the river deeper into slavery. The conclusion of Twain’s novel reveals the holes in social Darwinistic justifications for human roles in society, especially those justifications that involved racism. By incorporating the idea of nature vs. nurture, Twain attacks a basis of social Darwinism.

Social Darwinism relies on the idea of nature over nurture, arguing for nature to have free reign over society, because it is most powerful. Any forms of nurture found in protection or welfare are unnecessary and should be eliminated. Efforts of reform were “efforts to remedy the irremediable and interfered with the wisdom of nature and would

³⁸ Ibid., 23.

³⁹ Ibid., 114.

only lead to degeneration.”⁴⁰ William Graham Sumner’s ideas in “What Social Classes Owe to Each Other,” also remain as an example of a social Darwinistic explanation using nature vs. nurture. He writes, “certain ills belong to the hardships of human life. They are natural. They are part of the struggle with Nature for existence.”⁴¹ Those who do not survive the struggle, the weak (he points out that this is a sympathetic title given by humanitarians and philanthropists) “are the ones through whom the productive and conservative forces of society are wasted.”⁴² He surmises, “society, therefore, does not need any care or supervision.”⁴³ In conclusion he says that only when society embraces social Darwinism are they truly civilized.⁴⁴ Twain may not mention the phrase “nature vs. nurture,” but his theme of nature vs. nurture in *Puddn’head Wilson*, favoring nurture, is a statement against social Darwinism.

In *Puddn’head Wilson* and many other works, Twain, also confronts Sumner’s statement that societies embracing social Darwinism are truly civilized. Social Darwinism produced one image of civilization while Realist writing depicted the opposite. To writers like Twain, society was not becoming more civilized, but rather uncivilized. Twain writes, “education consists mainly in what we have unlearned.”⁴⁵ Twain shows that the education provided in the Gilded Age was not educating people in a way that provides true learning, but was rather teaching lessons that would have to be unlearned, like bad habits, in order for improvement. Social thought needed to return to

⁴⁰ Hofstadter, *Social Darwinism*, 7.

⁴¹ William Graham Sumner, “What Social Classes Owe to Each Other” (New York, 1883), in *Bibliobase* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2002), 133.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid., 135.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 136.

⁴⁵ Twain, Notebook 1898, in Paine, ed., *Mark Twain’s Notebook*, 184.

the purpose of people, and undo what corruption and the Gilded Age had done to democracy.

Mark Twain usually refers to democracy in his writing when making a point, whether it is about imperialism, racism, corruption, or civilization. Quite frequently, Mark Twain questions democracy directly as well, by condemning the opposite of democracy, monarchy and succession. He writes,

The body of the people ignored, allowed no vote, their desires in the matter held to be of no consequence by these upstarts. The conspirators make the succession permanent in this king's family, and the crime is complete.⁴⁶

His point is that monarchy eradicates the voice of the people, and chooses leaders based on social status rather than skill. Kings and other nobility have demonstrated no intelligence or backbone in the eyes of Mark Twain. He sarcastically writes on the subject again, describing in jest, how he had plans to hold a lecture and was going to borrow “a couple of kings and nobility,” from a man in the same line of business as Madame Tussaud (wax statues).⁴⁷ His conference attendees would sit and listen, never commenting, “perfectly infatuated.”⁴⁸ Unfortunately, or perhaps fortunately since Twain was once again exhibiting sarcasm, the statues underwent mishaps and never made it to the conference. Twain belittles monarchy, but continually reiterates that America's current democracy is no better. He states, “I couldn't gird at the English love for titles while our own love for titles was still more open to sarcasm.”⁴⁹ He once again specifically mocks the “titles” of the elite during the Gilded Age when he suggests that “We adore titles and heredities in our hearts and ridicule them with our mouths. This is

⁴⁶ Twain, Notebook, in *ibid.*, 197.

⁴⁷ Twain, “Letter to the Editor,” *Morning Post*, c. 12/12/1873, in Fatout, ed., *Mark Twain Speaks for Himself*, 86-87.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

our democratic privilege.”⁵⁰ America during the Gilded Age was lacking the democracy it claimed to follow. The problems and social Darwinistic justifications of the problems made America no more “American,” than an ancient monarchy.

Mark Twain not only reveals the aspects of corruption and problems of Gilded Age society while using his points to confront social Darwinism, he also values the importance of the way in which he expresses his ideas, and the importance of enjoying the capability to express such ideas. The manner of expression as well as the ability to state ideas, thoughts and opinions is just as, if not more, crucial to the way Realist writers challenged social Darwinist thought and practice. The method of Realist writers is what distinguished their voice as successfully different than the voices of others. Fighters against the social Darwinism of the Gilded Age needed more than just words, they needed the right kind of words.

Thorstein Veblen is an example of unpopular and therefore, unsuccessful intellectual opposition to social Darwinism. His rebuttal is in the form of an essay, “Theory of the Leisure Class.” He turns the theory of social Darwinism upside down by claiming that the rich were social parasites and hindrances to human evolution. To Veblen, the wealthy were a burden to a society because their greed and laziness did nothing for betterment and only hurt the economy and production. Veblen’s theory did not find favor among contemporary economists, most of whom accepted laissez-faire theories and were wealthy as well.⁵¹ Other writers, even novelists, such as Edward

⁴⁹ Twain, “Mark Twain on England,” *New York World*, n.d., reprinted in *Hartford Courant*, 5/14/1879, in *Ibid.*, 122.

⁵⁰ Twain, *Autobiography (burlesque); First Romance; and Memoranda*, (Toronto: James Campbell & Son, 1871), 66.

⁵¹ Thorstein Veblen, “Theory of the Leisure Class” (1899) in *Bibliobase*, 192.

Bellamy or Herman Melville also commented on social problems of the Gilded Age, but did little to combat the problems.⁵²

Mark Twain's realist writing involved rhetorical devices such as sarcasm, satire, parody, and dialect to cause a reader to realize a hidden reality and look beyond the work. These are the devices that enabled Twain to exhibit a powerful dual purpose when writing. One device perfected and defined by Mark Twain was especially powerful. He writes, "The human race has one really effective weapon, and that is laughter."⁵³ In an essay discussing Twain's humor, Peter Messent states that "humor may have the power to fundamentally disrupt social convention."⁵⁴ Twain not only brought literature back to a "common" democratic level by disrupting social convention, but he used humor to do so making the works popular and powerful. An essay on the capabilities of humor, "Wit and Politics," explains the power of humor and describes the way a simple story in itself may not be political, but that a "harmless comedy becomes political because the storyteller points out the relationship to immediately felt political circumstances."⁵⁵ Twain perfected this hidden duty of a narrated story and used it to his advantage in almost all his works.

Twain himself realized the importance of his literature almost as a mission, and embodied the fight against social Darwinism. He assumed the role of overturning society in an inscription to Clara Clemens found in her copy of *The Gilded Age*: "The old saw says--'let a sleeping dog lie.'" Experience knows better; experience says, If you

⁵² Bellamy's *Looking Backward*, which tried to offer a utopia based in solidarity and equality held together with love as the answer to the problems of industrialization, and Melville's "Bartleby the Scrivener" (1853), which discusses human alienation by the market place.

⁵³ Twain, Notebook, n.d., www.twainquotes.com

⁵⁴ Peter Messent, "Keeping Both Eyes Open: 'The Stolen White Elephant' and Mark Twain's Humor," *Studies in American Humor* 3 (1995): 62.

want to convince do it yourself.”⁵⁶ He reiterated the importance of expressing thoughts again when he said, “Our opinions do not really blossom into fruition until we have expressed them to someone else.”⁵⁷ Opinions are important, words are important, and a democracy that allows one to express them is of most importance. Mark Twain offered more than just an undercurrent of themes to fight social Darwinism. He perfectly embodied the most powerful attributes of the Realist movement in both in wordplay and in personality, as well as focused on the necessity of having a voice. The result was an attack against social Darwinism.

Mark Twain was democracy in person. Much of his personality was based on the same combination of personal eccentricities and folksy mannerisms, which made up the appeal of several of the country’s heroes. Pettit observes, “When Americans heard that Andrew Jackson had spelled poorly and smoked a corn cob pipe, that Lincoln was largely self-educated and told earthy jokes, or that Grant issued mono-syllabic war memos and chewed his cigars to shreds, they took these gestures as self reflecting symbols of democracy in action.”⁵⁸ So when Mark Twain perfected a “plain-folks” image, he placed himself in direct line with the others of that image. Twain’s contemporary, Howells, echoes the same sentiment, “Emerson, Longfellow, Lowell, Holmes- I knew them all and the rest of our sages, poets, seers, critics, humorists; they were like one another and like other literary men; but Clemens was sole, incomparable, the Lincoln of our literature.”⁵⁹ Twain himself cements the democratic image with quips about

⁵⁵ Hans Speier, “Wit and Politics: An Essay on Laughter and Power,” *The American Journal of Sociology* 103 (March 1998): 1357.

⁵⁶ Twain, Notebook, n.d., www.twainquotes.com: Clara was his daughter.

⁵⁷ Twain, Notebook, n.d., www.twainquotes.com

⁵⁸ Pettit, “Bicentennial,” 141.

⁵⁹ William Dean Howells in *My Mark Twain* 1910 in Maxwell Geismar, *Mark Twain on the Damned Human Race* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1962), introduction.

education and spelling; “I have never let my schooling interfere with my education.”⁶⁰ He also states, “I never had any large respect for good spelling. That is my feeling yet. Before the spelling book came with its arbitrary forms, men unconsciously revealed shades of their characters and also added enlightening shades of expression to what they wrote by their spelling, and so it is possible that the spelling-book has been a doubtful benevolence to us.”⁶¹

Mark Twain’s perfected image was not the only way he purposely embodied democracy. His diction also included words specifically designed for a greater purpose. Word choice plays an important part in any phase in American rhetoric and the Gilded Age was no exception. If anything, it was a perfect example. An essayist writes, “when novelists like Henry James or Samuel Clemens present characters as “the American,” or “the Yankee,” they present them not only as reflections but also as products of a certain kind of community. They invite their readers, therefore, to reflect on what makes Americans “American” or on the character regime as a whole.”⁶² In *Mark Twain and the Gilded Age: Some Suggestions for Comparative Study*, K. S. Inglis takes the analysis further as he proves his claim that “The language of this generation is itself a subject worth exploring.”⁶³ Inglis focuses on the word “corruption” and its affect on Gilded Age society noting that “the word corruption is worth a long essay.”⁶⁴ He explains that ever since Thomas Jefferson’s famous use of the word, which expressed an anxiety that urban society would lead to corruption, Americans have been afraid of the word “corruption,”

⁶⁰ Twain, Notebook, n.d., www.twainquotes.com.

⁶¹ Twain, *Autobiography*, 48.

⁶² Catherine Zuckert, “On Reading Classic American Novelists as Political Thinkers,” *The Journal of Politics* 43 (Aug, 1981): 684.

⁶³ K.S. Inglis, “Mark Twain and The Gilded Age: Some Suggestions for Comparative Study,” *Australian Economic History Review* 7 (1967): 32.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

and scared that some force would corrupt their republican democracy. Jefferson attached fear to the word “corruption,” and placed that fear in the context of urban society. The authors of the Federalist Papers spread the idea across the nation and into the history books as some of the first political propaganda. Corruption did not just mean an underhanded deed, but also one which jeopardized democracy, and Americans would conjure that meaning of the word at its mention.

Twain did in fact use specific connotative words, especially “corruption” to create powerful phrases of his own that would counter the catch phrases of social Darwinism such as “survival of the fittest.” Corruption appears many times in his novel *The Gilded Age*, and not only pointed out unethical dealings, but also subliminally triggered thoughts of democracy. Mark Twain’s Colonel Sellers observes:

There is no country in the world, Sir, that pursues corruption as inveterately as we do. There is no country in the world whose representatives try each other as much as ours do, or stick to it as long on a stretch. I think there is something great in being a model for the whole civilized world ...⁶⁵

This excerpt also illuminates the theme of civilization once again. The idea of a civilized world and the questioning of the degeneration of civilization became almost synonymous with a sarcastic critique of industrialization, including the elite who profited from it, and encouraged members of society to fight against the new “civilization.”

The method Twain used in his writing and the words he chose spoke directly and subliminally to his audience. In “The Empirical and the Ideal in Mark Twain,” Jeffery Duncan shows how a duality in Twain’s writing makes him successful. “Twain the realist uses words to direct our attention to life, Twain the humorist directs our attention

⁶⁵ Twain, *The Gilded Age*, 83.

to the words themselves, to the cross-eyed patterns of concepts they display.”⁶⁶ Duncan defines Realism as the commonsense empiricism, and humor as being based on philosophical idealism. Twain brings the two together, connecting words and life in the readers’ minds. A message in all his works, therefore, is that words have power, just like the word “corruption.” One should pay attention to the words of a story as a direct correlation to life. Sarcastic humor allows Twain to do this over and over again, taking a word and redefining it in a way that encourages society to question itself. He questions the definition of “good” in his quote “The man who doesn't read good books has no advantage over the man who can't read them.”⁶⁷ He also wrote “My books are water; those of the great geniuses is wine. Everybody drinks water.”⁶⁸ Twain is seeking to say that what society defines as good, is not necessarily good, and that the average common quality such as water is a necessary staple. One last quip of his gives further force to his point. “There are no common people except in the highest spheres of society.”⁶⁹ Here he redefines “common people” or “highest spheres of society.” He is either trying to say that true “common” people are only those who look down upon others from a higher point, or that the highest spheres of life are those which hold the common people. Either interpretation, confronts elitism and its social Darwinism justification that select people are naturally “better.” Twain does so by using words with specific connotations and attaching them to present day life.

Events following Mark Twain’s era have further proved the power of words by demonstrating the association of simple words with complicated meanings. Mark

⁶⁶ Jeffrey Duncan, “The Empirical and The Ideal in Mark Twain,” *PMLA* 95 (Mar. 1980): 201.

⁶⁷ Twain, Notebook, n.d., www.twainquotes.com.

⁶⁸ Twain, Letter to Howells, 2/15/1887, in Henry Nash Smith, ed., *Mark Twain-Howells Letters*, vol. 2, 1872-1910 (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1960), 587.

Twain's character Hank Morgan, the showy mechanic of *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* coins the term, the "New Deal" to characterize his career as developer of machines and promoter of attitudes that bring progress and destruction to Arthurian England. "It seemed to me that what the nine hundred and ninety-four dupes needed was a new deal."⁷⁰ It is no coincidence that the New Deal became Franklin Roosevelt's plan for America in 1932. Roosevelt was trying to conjure up the ideas of democracy and progress that Twain created with his plan as shown in an excerpt from his speech

"I pledge you, I pledge myself, to a new deal for the American people. Let us all here assembled constitute ourselves prophets of a new order of competence and of courage. This is more than a political campaign; it is a call to arms. Give me your help, not to win votes alone, but to win in this crusade to restore America to its own people."⁷¹

Twain attacked problems of the Gilded Age in his novels, quotes and speeches, and he did so in a way that emphasized democracy and the power of literature in maintaining democracy. Democracy needed a voice. Twain provided it and paved the way for others to pick up where he left off. He showed the power of words. His efforts undermined social Darwinism, and his various statements and themes show that though he never used the phrase "social Darwinism," he was very much against the theory.

Just because Twain did not specifically engage in discussion about social Darwinism does not mean that he did not discuss evolution. In fact he had many opinions on the subject, usually expressed with pessimistic sarcasm. He jokes, "I believe our Heavenly Father invented man because he was disappointed in the monkey,"⁷² or in a

⁶⁹ Twain, quoted in Fischer, "Abroad with Mark Twain," www.twainquotes.com

⁷⁰ Twain, *Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (New York, 1889), 104.

⁷¹ Franklin D. Roosevelt, "Roosevelt's Nomination Address," July 2, 1932, *The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt*, Vol. 1, 1928-32, (New York City: Random House, 1938), 647.

⁷² Twain in "Eruption," read at www.twainquotes.com

slightly more elegant manner, “It now seems plain to me that that theory ought to be vacated in favor of a new and truer one...the Descent of Man from the Higher Animals.”⁷³

Unfortunately one author has mistaken Twain’s familiarity with Darwinism as a belief in social Darwinism. Sherwood Cummings claims to be writing an essay discussing Twain’s views on social Darwinism but has rather mistaken social Darwinism for Darwinism in his essay “Mark Twain’s Social Darwinism.” He lists books of Darwin’s that Twain apparently read such as *The Descent of Man*, *The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin*, and *The Origin of Species*.⁷⁴ Cummings then concludes that “in the nineties, Mark Twain became responsive enough to Darwinian ideas ... and revealed a competent grasp of evolution and its implications, though his interpretations tended toward impulsive oversimplification.”⁷⁵ It is important to note that Darwinism is not social Darwinism as so many misconstrue. In “Social Darwinism: The Concept,” Paul Crook clarifies that “Darwin’s evolutionary writings were capable of any number of different interpretations, and they were pressed into service of a great variety of intellectual and social interests,” and it is these interests, rather than Darwin’s original aims which give rise to social Darwinism.⁷⁶ Furthermore, “it is impossible to see social Darwinism as a simple and obvious application of the Darwinian theory to man.”⁷⁷ Social Darwinists used the idea of natural selection to provide scientific justification for ideology while ignoring other biological concepts of the laws of social development.

Many argue that Darwin himself would have disapproved of social Darwinism, mostly because Darwin believed that the success of people, societies and civilizations

⁷³ Twain in “The Lowest Animal,” www.twainquotes.com

⁷⁴ Sherwood Cummings, “Mark Twain’s Social Darwinism,” *The Huntington Library Quarterly* 20 (1956), 165.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 166.

depended upon circumstances of historical, geographical, and moral factors more so than on genetic factors of selection. In *The Descent of Man* he writes, “natural selection acts only tentatively.”⁷⁶ Cummings makes even another mistake when attempting to define “Mark Twain’s social interpretation of Darwinism” which he believed to mean Twain’s social Darwinism. Cummings says that Twain felt that “since man is a creature of nature it is inevitable that he will follow the law of nature, which is eat or be eaten.”⁷⁹

Cummings has confused Twain’s views of nature and man. Twain does not believe that the law of nature is to eat or be eaten. That, to Twain, is the law of men, and more specifically the law of men of the Gilded Age. The very law that Twain believes man should fight against. Man, in Twain’s opinion, has failed to mimic nature. Nature is good, man is evil; “Each race determines for itself what indecencies are. Nature knows no indecencies; man invents them.”⁸⁰ Twain’s other views on evolution prove that man corrupted nature, not the other way around. Cummings’ evaluation of Mark Twain’s familiarity of evolution is probably fairly accurate, but his interpretation is incorrect and he fails to keep in mind first and foremost the difference between social Darwinism and Darwinism. Secondly, he failed to note that Mark Twain’s pessimism was actually an expression on the social Darwinian practices of the Gilded Age, not on the nature of mankind. Just because he was frustrated with man during his era did not mean that he gave up on the entire humankind. Twain was often frustrated with society, and much of that frustration caused him to exhibit a love-hate relationship with his fellow men. This

⁷⁶ Paul Crook, “Social Darwinism: The Concept,” *History of European Ideas* 22 (1996): 261.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 262.

⁷⁸ Charles Darwin, quoted in *ibid.*, 271.

⁷⁹ Cummings, “Social Darwinism,” 165.

⁸⁰ Twain, Notebook, 1896, in Paine, ed., *Mark Twain’s Notebook*, 126.

may cause some confusion when looking at the nature of Mark Twain's character, but not at Mark Twain's views of nature.

So what would Twain have said if asked about social Darwinism?⁸¹ His works provide the extensive answer, but to sum it up in a short phrase, as Twain would have most likely done, it would be something along the lines of words borrowed from *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*; "How empty is theory in the presence of fact."⁸²

The "fact" is that social Darwinism did not mesh with a democratic America, and Mark Twain helped to expose this volatile combination. If the government was not doing the job, then Mark Twain would. After all, as Twain said, "the government is not best which secures mere life and property—there is a more valuable thing--manhood."⁸³ By the end of the 19th century, many Americans realized that their fortunes were not improved by giving strength to the already rich and powerful. Speculative collapses, widespread economic misery in the Panics of 1873 and 1896, riots and general unhappiness finally overcame the Gilded Age.⁸⁴ Americans needed a way to overcome their collapse and Twain spoke up. In "Shall the Elite Inherit the Earth?" Jeffrey Klein states that "exposing the distorting power of the economic elite helped end the Gilded Age."⁸⁵ The lower and middle classes needed a way to make sure the elite did not "inherit the Earth." The power of words became a reality. Mark Twain represents a body

⁸¹ There is no record that this ever occurred. Cummings' essay is purely speculation and as far as I have been able to find, Mark Twain and social Darwinism have not been examined together with the exception of Cummings' work.

⁸² Twain, *Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1889), 102.

⁸³ Twain, Notebook, n.d., www.twainquotes.com.

⁸⁴ Trachtenberg, *Incorporation*, 39.

⁸⁵ Jeffrey Klein, "Shall the Elite Inherit the Earth?" *Mother Jones* 21 (March-April 1996): 3. 1-4

of Americans who will continually confront social Darwinist trends in America simply by having a voice.

Mark Twain's Realist writing focused on the problems of the Gilded Age and attacked the destructiveness and falseness of using social Darwinism to justify the issues. He did so in a way that brought social theory back into writing and expression, and back in the hands of all the people, not just the elite. Alan Trachtenberg iterates, "Realism represented nothing less than the extension of democracy into the precincts of fiction."⁸⁶

The choice of Twain and others to use the voice of Realism to confront the problems of the Gilded Age has had implications in the lives of those who follow. Even Twain himself said, "The minor events of history are valuable, although not always showy and picturesque."⁸⁷ A literary movement was all the time needed, one that encouraged American's to find a voice.

Immediately following the Gilded Age, American's used the voice of democracy to fight for labor unions, which would eventually help to secure an eight hour working day, set wages, and other rights of workers to keep them from being exploited by proponents of social Darwinism.⁸⁸ America also succeeded in adapting several regulation laws such as the Sherman Anti Trust Act of 1890, the Pendleton Act of 1883 (placed government positions under civil-service rules), and the Commerce Act of 1887, all which stopped laissez-faire attitudes of uninhibited reign of power at any cost.⁸⁹ Twain was a part of a drive to stop social Darwinistic practices in a democratic nation.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Twain, "The Game" instruction sheet for Mark Twain's Memory Builder, found in, Paine ed., *Mark Twain's Notebook*, 168.

⁸⁸ Walter Licht, *Industrializing America: The Nineteenth Century* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 169.

⁸⁹ Trachtenberg, *Incorporation*, 165.

Twain, along with other aspects of the Realist movement, also helped reform by safeguarding the freedom of speech that cartoonists took advantage of. Political cartoons have played a role in every political affair since their birth. A political essayist reflects that “humor has played a very large part in our political campaigns; in fact, it may be said that it has played almost as large a part as principle—which is the name that politicians give to their theories. It is a fact that ... the happy allusion, the humorous anecdote ... will change the whole prospects of a political struggle.”⁹⁰ The personality of political parties as well as their equal competition with each other originated in the Gilded Age. Not only is the nature of today’s party system a product of the Gilded Age, but author Sanford believes that literature directly affected the party system as well. “Mark Twain’s tentative identification of material prosperity with democratic progress, an identity underlying both Andrew Carnegie’s *Gospel of Wealth*” and Horatio Alger success story has, in the twentieth century become the basic premise of the two major political parties.”⁹¹

The ability to have a third party also arose in response to the Gilded Age. Many labor or farmers parties, such as the Populists, entered elections. Soon after, the Socialist Party appeared in the United States, led by Eugene Debs, with communal values in direct opposition to social Darwinism. Welfare and reform came in the progressive era with leaders like Jane Addams who lent a hand to the poor with her Hull House rather than use them as a stair step to the top.

⁹⁰ Walter Blair, “The Popularity of Nineteenth-Century American Humorists,” *American Literature* 3 (May 1931): 177.

⁹¹ Charles L. Sanford, “Classics of American Reform Literature,” *American Quarterly* 10 (Autumn 1958): 305.

American society would not be what it is today if not for the many changes that took place during the Gilded Age. Mark Twain aided those changes by producing a literature that critiqued social Darwinism. The ideas and style of his critique manifested one new way to enhance the public opinion of a democratic nation. As Mark Twain showed, a voice is powerfully important. History is made up of not only the words we speak, but is greatly governed by our right to speak them. Literature connects to history by producing the meanings of words society looks to for power. Mark Twain uses the literature of the Realist movement to object to social Darwinism. Returning to the novels, issues and quotes of writers is just as important as returning to the facts, but intellectual history does not solely involve the ideas found in great essays and theories of social thought. Intellectual history is complete only after an examination of literature of all levels, and not only what writers said, but how they said it. So, with Mark Twain's eminent sarcasm in mind, it is important to let the Realist writer speak for himself:

“It is by the goodness of God that in our country we have those three unspeakably precious things: freedom of speech, freedom of conscience, and the prudence never to practice either of them.”⁹²

⁹² Twain, “Following the Equator,” 1897, www.twainquotes.com

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