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In Search of the Missing Link: Mark Twain and Darwinism

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

IN SEARCH OF THE MISSING LINK: MARK TWAIN AND DARWINISM Stan Poole * Early in 1885, at the height of his literary career and prosperity, Mark Twain wrote a short piece called "The Character of Man" that expressed a deeply negative view of man in Darwinian terms. The piece describes man as the tail-end of a tape-worm eternity of ancestors extending in linked procession back—and back—and back—to our source in the monkeys, with this so-called individuality of ours a decayed and rancid mush of inherited instincts and teachings derived, atom by atom, stench by stench, from the entire line of that sorry column.¹ At first glance one would think this Darwinian determinism belonged to the later period, where it would fit in with the image of Mark Twain as a bitter, misanthropic old man railing at the world and its discredited Creator. Indeed, critics interested in Twain's later pessimism have often pointed out the contribution of Darwinian theories to his later philosophical determinism. In the first serious examination of Twain's response to Darwin's work,

for example, Hyatt Waggoner concluded that Mark Twain "arrived at an unshakable belief in absolute determinism; and his belief was scientifically grounded."² Another look at Mark Twain's knowledge of Darwinism and his response to evolutionary theory as expressed in his later works, however, suggests that he neither accepted Darwinian evolution as fully as many critics have assumed nor found in it any absolute theory of man's condition in the world. It seems more likely that Mark Twain treated the complex body of theoretical material associated with Darwinism as a source of stimulating ideas he found useful for expressing his own varied response to life but which never provided the kind of unified vision necessary for a coherent philosophy. A reassessment of the relationship between Mark Twain's later works and Darwinism further suggests that the image of Twain as a bitter misanthrope during his last years obscures his deep compassion and moral conviction. The typical argument made by critics interested in the Darwinian influence on Mark Twain's determinism runs along the following lines: The critic will refer to Twain's marginalia in his copy of Darwin's *The Descent of Man*, noting that the comments indicate a favorable reception of Darwin's ideas. His reading of a number of other works sympathetic to Darwin, such as T. H. Huxley's *Evolution and Ethics*, Ernst Haeckel's *The Wonders of Life*, and A. D. White's *History of the Warfare of Science with Religion*, is then cited as further evidence of Mark Twain's approval. Finally, Twain's *Notebooks*, *Autobiography*, and *Letters*, along with Albert B. Paine's biography, are mined for any favorable comments they may cast on Darwinism.³ Typically, the critic then comes to a conclusion similar to the one offered by Sherwood Cummings: "What gave substance and form to [Mark Twain's] final pessimistic philosophies of materialism and determinism was ... his reading in contemporary science, particularly in Darwin and Huxley."⁴ While this argument has usefully pointed out the sources of some of Mark Twain's ideas, it has exaggerated the Darwinian influence on Twain by assuming that he accepted Darwinism with virtually no reservations. This account of Twain's response seems inadequate in two ways: it fails to consider the complexity of the forms Darwinism took in the late nineteenth century, and it simplifies Twain's own response in ways that distort essential features of his late career. Although the Darwinian controversy is often represented in simple terms of religion versus science, faith versus reason, or tradition versus modernism, it was hardly a simple matter for serious thinkers in the late nineteenth century. While fundamentalist Christians and dogmatic agnostics insisted that the issues were drawn clearly in black and white, most intellectuals could neither accept nor reject Darwinian theories with such facile confidence.⁵ With the scientific community itself divided over the implications of Darwin's theories, the controversy soon spread from the academic circles to the larger society...

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Stan Poole*

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the tail end of a rope—where eternity of ancestors extending in linked procession back—and back—and back—to our source in the rocks—keys, with this so-called individuality of ours, a decayed and mouldy mass of inherited instincts and teachings derived, a man by atom, section by section, from the entire line of that sorry column.¹

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