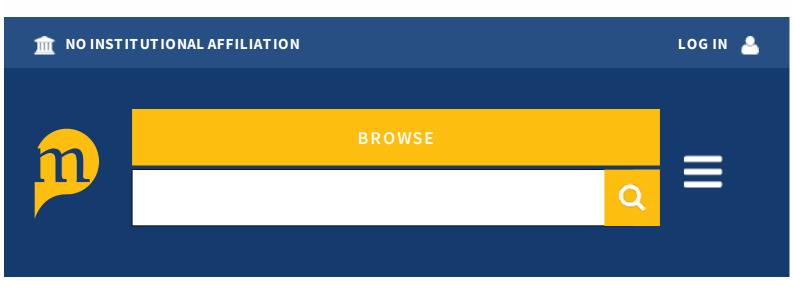
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In Search of the Missing Link: Mark Twain and Darwinism.



# O In Search of the Missing Link: Mark Twain and Darwinism

Stan Poole

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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. 1At 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 "Stan Poole is a graduate
student in English at the University of Virginia. This article is his first publication. 202Stan Poole 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 Darwinis m.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 nine teenth 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 nine teenth century. While
fundamentalist Christians and dog matic 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

#### IN SEARCH OF THE MISSING LINK: MARK TWAIN AND DARWINISM

#### Stan Poole\*

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<sup>\*</sup>Stan Profile is a graduate student in English at the University of Vitginia. This satisfic is los first publication.



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