
Twain's Move toward Fantasy: A Study of His Writings, 1905–1906

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In 1904 and 1905, Twain rather abruptly injected the philosophical or religious concept of the “soul” into two of his major works, namely, *No.44, The Mysterious Stranger* (1902-1908) and *What is Man?* (1906). Considering how much he respected Oliver Wendell Holmes (1809–1894), Charles Darwin (1809-1882), Herbert Spencer (1820–1903), and T. H. Huxley (1825–1895), and that he admired rational and scientific ways of thinking, it is rather astonishing that he began to use the term “soul” instead of “mind.” After all, the latter is arguably a more scientific term to explain the human psyche, one that he used at least until the very beginning of the 1900s. Indeed, the philosophical change in his view of the “soul” happened suddenly. He used the term “soul” in the “A Difficult Question” section of *What is Man?* and in several places after Chapter 19 of *No.44*. After adding new parts that included “soul” to what he had written before, he completed these works but in both cases he had considerable difficulty in maintaining consistency. As recent scholars have asserted, Twain began in his final years to write fantastic works set in impossible other worlds. Quite likely his acceptance of a philosophical version of the soul had much to do with his fictional move toward fantasy. Yet, one must ask, what could have prompted this sudden and seemingly unavoidable shift in Twain’s writing?

In the famous “dream-ending” of *No.44* written in 1904, the reader discovers *No.44* informing August of man’s immortality. Namely, he reveals to August that man is the only existent thought in a shoreless space, destined to wander forever among the empty eternities (Tuckey 62-64). We should recall that this very year Twain’s beloved wife Olivia passed away, and the next year Twain decided to burn 30,000 words of the book, a block of the story following Chapter 19. Changes Twain made to *No. 44* in 1905 were likely influenced by Olivia’s death, and may well explain Twain’s coming to believe rather suddenly in man’s immortal life — that is, in the soul.

With his beloved wife gone, Twain may have become preoccupied with a desire for the afterlife. In such a desperate state that he could not live without believing in immortal life or heaven, Twain lost himself in writing about it. Soon after Olivia's death, and throughout the short period of time between 1905 and 1906, the amount of the work he engaged in was astounding. Twain worked ceaselessly and with great concentration on multiple projects despite his waning strength. In April 1905, he started to work on "The Refuge of the Derelicts." Between May 20 and June 23, after settling at Dublin, New Hampshire, he wrote "Three Thousand Years Among the Microbes" and completed all of the manuscripts that now exist. In June he continued working on the manuscript of *No.44* and wrote all but one chapter. By July 12, he had written "Eve's Diary" and revised the earlier "Adam's Diary." During the remainder of his stay at Dublin, which lasted into October, he wrote "Interpreting the Deity" and "A Horse's Tale," and did some work on *What Is Man?*, adding the section called "A Difficult Question." Some time after mid-1905 and probably during the early months of 1906, he re-read a manuscript he wrote thirty years ago, "Captain Stormfield's Visit to Heaven," and wrote a brief introductory note followed by two new beginning chapters. He also provided two new final chapters, "Captain Stormfield Resumes," which also contained the section called "A Journey to the Asterisk," and "From Captain Stormfield's Reminiscences."¹ Meanwhile in June 1906, he spent his days in autobiographical dictation, and worked on the latter portions of "The Refuge of the Derelicts," the short novel begun the year before (*FM* 12-14, *BAMT* 135).

Let it suffice merely to stress that quite a few of Twain's writings written during this period take up the issue of heaven. To start with, *No.44* is a young stranger who appears to have come from some august empire of the celestial world. In "Three Thousand Years Among the Microbes" as well, the world to which Huck finds himself transferred is a microcosmic version of the human world, one that is tiny only because relative to the boundless expanse of the universe. Here, Huck, who used to be a scientist in the human world, cannot help but dwell on the relationship between man and God. "Captain Stormfield's Visit to Heaven," as its title makes self-evident, is yet another story about Twain's idealized heaven.

If we can say that Twain came to take seriously the idea of heaven, we might also suppose that it had more than a little to do with the unfathomable misery and desolation

he experienced in his final years. Living a wretched, isolated life without solace for his grief, even a man of as exceptional and skeptical an intelligence as Twain perhaps found no other way to cope but to indulge in an imaginative heaven. Even more than his writing on his daughter Suzy's death, his response in Chapter 71 of his *Autobiography* to Olivia's death is heartbreaking. By this time, for the first time in his life, he must have come to think of fantasy as a means to approach his more unearthly desires, despite his habitual skepticism and reason. As Rosemary Jackson in *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* proposes, fantasy is fundamentally a literature of desire. Driven first of all by his desire for an idealized heaven, Twain soon began to depict a more variegated fantasy world.

Once we accept that Twain immersed himself in writing out fantasies of heaven, it comes as less of a surprise that the identity of the main protagonist in *No.44* or in "The Chronicle of Young Satan" (1897) would be a celestial being who pays a short visit to the earth out of curiosity. Such an idea can be traced back to the *Alta California* letters, out of which *The Innocents Abroad* (1869) developed, wherein Jesus returns to the earth as a playful boy (Michelson 108-9). However, full fictionalization of this idea had to wait thirty years until a playful boy whose name was changed to the peculiar "No.44, New Series 864,962" visits the earth in *No.44's* "The Chronicle of Young Satan." Perhaps the death of Twain's beloved daughter Suzy the preceding year (seven years before Olivia's death), brought to life the first ideas of heaven in Twain's mind. Satan reappears in Chapter 6 of "Stormfield" (written in 1905) as well as in *Letters from the Earth* (1909). In both cases, Satan comes to the earth from his curious home in heaven to observe and report on the situation of human beings who had been created as an experiment long ago, one that had been completely forgotten by God.²

What kind of a celestial world then, did Twain intend the "home" of these protagonists to be? The main characteristics of his heaven can be garnered from the works mentioned above, *No.44*, "The Chronicle of Young Satan," and "Stormfield." In parodying the sentimental and immensely popular Elizabeth Stuart Phelps's *The Gates Ajar* (1868) as a "mean little ten-cent heaven about the size of Rhode Island," for example, Twain emphasized the immensity of the universe he was beginning to conceive as his imagined heaven. In Chapter 5 of "Stormfield," Stormfield's friend Sandy McWilliams amazes the captain by introducing him to the vast distances of heaven as measured in the concept

of the light year. Since there are no Christian sects in heaven nearer than 5,000 light years from the camp of the next sect, that means heaven is the most lonesome of places. Inevitably, people have to travel among the stars just to find some company. Learning that light travels 186,000 miles a second, the captain finds that the immensity of heaven is really his imagination. He asks, “Why, Sandy, what have they made heaven so large, for?” And Sandy answers, “So’s to have room in the future. The redeemed will still be coming for billions and billions and billions and billions of years, but there’ll always be room, you see. This heaven ain’t built on any ‘Gates Ajar’ proportions” (*BAMT* 181).

Moreover, Twain’s heaven is far from the peaceful and idyllic “good place” Miss Watson describes to Huck in *Huckleberry Finn*. To start with, the inhabitants are not only white Christians but also include many races living in myriad worlds. Even the young stranger’s name, “No.44, New Series 864,962,” implies the diversity and large numbers of people living there.³ Moreover, all the inhabitants have a tremendously interesting time, having extraordinary adventures and making incredible discoveries every day, besides having plenty of work of the kind they like to do; consequently, these people lead the busiest and best of lives. Living in such an amazing environment, every inhabitant comes to possess a supernaturally creative power similar to that of No.44. Stormfield discovers after arriving in heaven that if he wants to be young, all he has to do is just wish for it. Creation is not God’s prerogative alone; indeed, even the creation of human beings had not always been God’s work, but had once been tried by Slattery, one of Satan’s connections (*BAMT* 183). In Twain’s heaven, there are many kinds of people with varieties of creative power.

Even a cursory examination of Twain’s heaven reveals his obvious parody of the Christian heaven. He parodies popular and pious representations of the Christian heaven by depicting it as unimaginably infinite based on scientific data; by making each inhabitant’s harp, wreath, halo, and hymnbook mere possessions often discarded in piles in the road; and finally, by including Satan, a fallen angel, among its population. We may recall at this point Huck who, when told by Miss Watson that all one has to do in heaven is to go around all day with a harp and sing, immediately loses interest in going there. Stormfield, on the other hand, when told that heaven is the busiest of places, exclaims, “It’s the sensiblest heaven I ever heard of” (159). For Twain — who considered tedium and

monotony to be the worst thing for people, deteriorating their intellects and making their minds dull — this widest and busiest of heavens punctuated with tremendous discoveries and wonders was truly ideal. Such a heaven was not one of Christian invention, but rather, Twain's own.

However, one notable characteristic does not seem appropriate for Twain's ideal heaven. Contrary to what one might expect, Twain's heaven is an absolute monarchy. In Chapter 4 of "Stormfield," Sandy tells us, "There are viceroys, princes, governors, sub-governors, sub-sub-governors, and a hundred orders of nobility, grading along down from grand-ducal archangels, stage by stage till the general level is struck"(169). Sandy and the captain are not "worthy to polish sandals" for the almighty high nobility. The ranks of the patriarchs and prophets are so high that Abraham's footprint has been cordoned off so people can flock to see it from all over heaven forever and ever. This kind of heaven is clearly incompatible with the democratic principles Twain advocated in his life and works. William Dean Howells, for instance, appreciated Twain precisely because he was "to the full the humorist, as we know him; but he is very much more, and his strong, indignant, often infuriate hate of injustice, and his love of equality, burn hot through the manifold adventures and experiences of the tale" (Howells 145). One has to wonder why Twain did not bother to alter the conventional celestial hierarchy in addition to parodying the Christian and popular sentimental heaven.

What Twain aimed to do, perhaps, was to bring about laughter by exaggerating the incomparable contrast between God and human beings, deploying a staple technique of satire. As early as 1870, in his letter to his fiancée Olivia Langdon, Twain had already mentioned how insignificant human beings were, with their "pigmy little world," implying that God could not think much of such insignificant beings (*Love Letter* 133-34). In many of his later works, he depicts either directly or indirectly the ruthlessness of God and the absurdity of trivial human beings whom God neglects just as man in his turn neglects microbes. In some works such as "The Chronicle of Young Satan," as well as in *No. 44*, this neglect on the part of God is scathingly attacked. In "Three Thousand Years Among the Microbes," microbe Huck is in earnest when he persistently asks a clergyman in the microbial world whether all of God's creatures are included in His merciful scheme of salvation. The matter of whether the humblest disease germs and microbes go to heaven

never loses its interest with Huck because he can imagine how a microbe can be on a par with man. Twain satirizes this pursuit of the truth, however, in having his frivolous fellow microbes make fun of Huck's earnest demeanor, outlining his form. In "Stormfield," the gap between the nobility and the common man is one Twain exploits as material for humor. Although Stormfield had harbored hopes of becoming acquainted with the grandees one day, once he realizes the impossibility, he expresses indifference and easily lets it drop, saying, "It don't matter, and I am plenty happy enough anyway" (169).

If God is the most remote of celestial nobility, such that even the people in heaven cannot get a glimpse of Him, it is not just hard to believe that He thinks much of other celestial inhabitants but simply impossible to imagine in the case of mere human beings. Under these conditions, God is not necessarily malicious and His neglect not always contemptuous; on the contrary, His view of "insignificant" human beings eagerly waiting for His answers to everything becomes Twain's material for humor. For instance, the confusion that results from time differences between earth and heaven leads to comical misunderstandings. As a result of the vast differences between celestial and human time, a thousand years of earthly time is only a day of heavenly time. As Sandy explains to the captain, even if the awful oppression of a nation had been going on eight or nine hundred years before Providence interfered, considering the difference between heavenly time and real time, one would have to say that Providence actually responded very promptly, no matter how disappointed people may have become in the meantime. If people pray for rain and Providence reflects a minute when the prayer comes up, by the time the answer reaches the earth it is already a year late as a result of such minor procrastination. Prayers are always answered, but people, not knowing the truth about earthly and heavenly time differences, stick to their beliefs that prayers are never answered (*BAMT* 186).

It is worth noting here that Twain, who had cursed God during the 1890s when he suffered numerous adversities, came to depict God's neglect with such tolerant humor in "Stormfield." Compared with No.44's explanation that man is destined after his death to an everlasting forlorn wandering among the empty eternities, the narration of Stormfield's wandering in the "empty eternities" is almost euphoric in tone. For instance, Stormfield had begun to get anxious after whizzing through space for about thirty years since he had heard his friends talking mournfully on his deathbed that he was booked for hell, and the

captain was sure it was true. However, he need not have worried: After a 30-year flight at the speed of light, during which time he had had an exciting race with an enormous comet that made him look like “a gnat closing up on the continent of America,” Stormfield safely arrived in heaven at last (148).

This kind of change from wandering about in an austere, lonely universe to taking instead a euphoric trip through the heavens is perhaps attributable to Twain's enduring fantasies about comets, fantasies that became stronger in his final years. In several passages, he depicts a comet either as a means of transportation in heaven or something into which man is transformed. Stormfield himself becomes like a comet after his death. Indulging himself in his fantastic heaven, Twain may have come to cherish the exhilarating idea that he could be saved from a horrible endless wandering by catching one of those comets or becoming one himself. Here we might recall just how much Twain longed for the arrival of Halley's comet on his deathbed.

However, there may be several other reasons why more cheerful fantasies of heaven appear in Twain's late works. We should take a closer look at the sea change that took place in Twain's way of thinking about realities, for example. Twain did not take the idea of another world in Heaven seriously until Olivia's death, just as Huck in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* when told by Miss Watson to pray every day and whatever he asked for he would get, soon gives up on it because there seems to be nothing in prayer. Gradually Twain became more generous, accepting illusions in his work. This change in his way of thinking is well reflected in the thinking of the microbial scientist Huck in “Three Thousand Years Among the Microbes.” Catherine, Huck's “dear little thing,” tells him that when she read a book called “Science and Wealth, With Key to the Fixtures” she completely believed what was written in it, and a change began to take place until finally she turned into a spirit.⁴ In response to her obvious delusion, Huck does not immediately chastise or refute her notion, advising her to put the “foolish and manifest fraud” out of her head; instead, he becomes more careful, considering it unsafe to sit in judgment upon another's illusion. What is more, he comes to recognize that if a man does not believe in or know something for sure, it is never taken as reality, yet, if he believes in or thinks he knows something, it becomes reality even if it is a mere illusion. Similarly, a desperate and lonely Twain came to believe in a fantasy of heaven, an idea that he had once ridiculed,

and which consequently became one of his realities.

In *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy*, John Clute defines a fantasy text as “a self-coherent narrative. When set in this world, it tells a story which is impossible in the world as we perceive it; when set in an otherworld, that otherworld will be impossible, though stories set there may be possible in its terms (338). We may safely affirm Twain’s heaven is this impossible “otherworld.” Even though he started to write fantasies largely driven by his desire to seek refuge from the memories of personal disasters, once he started writing them out, he must have come to find delight in creating his own reality, indulging himself in a literary freedom unprecedented for him. That his final works are interspersed with extraordinary and divergent themes so different from any that he had written before makes this self-evident. Surely, his late discovery of other worlds marked a significant fictional move in his literary career. Twain not only regained somewhat his former buoyancy but also began to make his own literary contributions to the genre of fantasy.

If we reconsider Twain’s fantasies of heaven according to scholars’ defining characteristics of fantasy, there are still other reasons why a more optimistic view of heaven can be seen in his later works. J.R.R. Tolkien, author of *The Lord of the Rings* (1954-5), once speculated about the kinds of changes fantasy might bring about in a person; in Tolkien’s view, such a man might feel the need to penetrate his illusion that the world has become trite or stale, an illusion produced by boredom, habit, false sophistication, and loss of faith. As Brian Attebery accurately clarifies, “To dispel it, it is necessary to see things in new ways, but rather than making familiar objects seem disconcerting or alien, [Tolkien] thought fantasy could restore them to the vividness with which we first saw them” (Attebery 16). Tolkien called this “recovery,” which means a process of re-gaining. By regaining or achieving a clear view, just as when windows are cleaned, things can again be seen clearly, Tolkien thought, and one “may be freed from the drab blur of triteness or familiarity — from possessiveness.” By means of fantasy (even though Tolkien conceded that fantasy was not the only means), one can penetrate illusion (Tolkien 57-59). Perhaps we can say that this “recovery” describes what Twain underwent by means of fantasy in his final years.

The model for both Stormfields in “The Refuge of the Derelicts” and “Captain Stormfield’s Visit to Heaven” was Captain Ned Wakeman, one of the most colorful and

energetic people Twain had ever met. Twain first met him on a steamer in 1866, and Wakeman's character and rich imagination greatly influenced numerous works by Twain. Surely it is no coincidence that this forceful personality appears relatively often in his later works, in particular. Twain must have called upon this lively personality to help him regain the vivid view of the world that once had come so easily to him.

After Twain underwent his "recovery," he was able to see the human race from a completely new angle, not as merely insignificant, dull, and absurd. The work that may best reflect Twain's sentiments about the human race around 1905 is "The Refuge of the Derelicts" (1905-6). In this work, the narrator is a young artist, George Sterling, whose curious dream is to build a monument to Adam. Staying at old Admiral Stormfield's home, which serves as a haven for human derelicts — "old and battered and broken that wander the ocean of life lonely and forlorn" (FM 186) — George gets acquainted with each of the derelicts and gradually comes to find the human race to be "pleasant, charming, engrossing" (FM 206). In June of 1905 during his stay at Dublin, New Hampshire, Twain unearthed an old sack of forgotten letters and came to cherish similar sentiments. In his dictation on 18 June he said:

I was never expecting to become industrious enough to overhaul that sack and examine its contents, but now that I am doing this autobiography the joys and sorrows of everybody, high and low, rich and poor, famous and obscure, are dear to me. I can take their heart affairs into my heart as I never could before. (FM 15)

During this period Twain wrote "Eve's Diary" (1905), believed to be a tribute to Olivia who had died just the year before, but the fact that he also revised the earlier "Adam's Diary" (1893-1905) probably indicates similar sympathetic sentiments for the human race in common with those expressed by George. After George discovers that even the derelicts of the human race can be remarkably interesting, he feels somehow enlivened and refreshed. Twain too might have felt this same way. George's feelings may mirror Twain's own:

Every day the feeling of the day before is renewed to me — the feeling of having been in a half-trance all my life before — numb, sluggish-blooded, sluggish-minded — a feeling which is followed at once by a brisk sense of being out of that syncope and awake! awake and alive; alive to my finger-ends. (FM 15)

Imaginative free play in an impossible otherworld helped reinvigorate Twain to a large extent, I argue here; yet, I must also insist that his fantasy was not made up of mere estranged illusions. One cannot say that he discarded his inclination to think rationally even in his later years. Some parts of “Dream Writings,” most of which he wrote during the 1890s, for example, were realistic depictions of Twain’s own experience. While it is true that he depicted things that are impossible in our world and scientifically beyond proof, they remain “emotionally and psychologically, if not scientifically, valid” (Attebery 109). And as far as his celestial writings are concerned, the concept of the soul was conceived not in a Christian sense, as we have seen, but rather used to represent the mysteries of the mind that escape our conventional logic and scientific reasoning.⁵

Critics agree that fantasy has connections with even our most mundane realities. In *Strategies of Fantasy*, Attebery cites C.N. Manlove’s definition of fantasy, which explains that it as “a fiction evoking wonder and containing a substantial and irreducible element of supernatural or impossible worlds, beings or objects with which the mortal characters in the story or the readers become on at least partly familiar terms” (1). Attebery agrees with Manlove’s concept of wonder as a key to fantasy’s appeal, and expands it so that it “may best be understood as an alternative formulation of the idea of estrangement,” which has come into English-language critical discourse from two sources, namely, “defamiliarization” and “alienation” (Attebery 16). Author Paul Auster said almost the same thing more concisely in response to an interview in Japan in 1998. He cited the words of Peter Brook, an English stage director: “Without everyday familiarities people are not moved, without estrangement they don’t wonder.” Auster further stated that even a story depicted from a strange point of view, in which reality is mingled with dreams, takes root in its own sense of reality.⁶

Throughout his life, Twain ceaselessly sought for discoveries, novelties, gaieties, and

all those things that arouse wonder. Desperately hating monotony and its tendency to dull the mind, Twain “recovered” from the despair of his later years by resorting to fantasy and exercising his imagination in new ways. In doing so, he never failed to delineate both reality and the wonders he conjured out of it in his writings.

Abbreviations

BAMT *Bible According to Mark Twain*

FM *Mark Twain's Fables of Man*

Notes

¹ The introductory note and Chapters 1 and 2 were first published in *Report From Paradise* edited by Dixon Wecter, but Chapters 5 and 6 were not published until 1970, when they were included in *Mark Twain's Quarrel with Heaven*, edited by Ray B. Browne.

² Twain seems to have felt a curious affection for Satan. Admiral Stormfield, touched by the idea of Satan's being a failure in life, may serve as Twain's mouthpiece when he exclaims, “Well, he's out of luck — like so many — like so many — and a body has to pity him, you can't help it” (*FM* 195).

³ William M. Gibson concludes that “the number and name ‘44’ indicates simply that ‘Satan's original host have large families,’ as the author says in his working notes for ‘Schoolhouse Hill’” (*BAMT* 473).

⁴ Obviously, “Science and Wealth, With Key to the Fixtures” corresponds to Mary Baker Eddy's *Science and Health With Key to the Scriptures* (1875).

⁵ For further discussion on this concept of mind, see my *A New Perspective on Mark Twain: Dream and Fantasy in his Later Years*.

⁶ My translation is from the Japanese column “*Tsukuru Angle*” in the *Nikkei* of 8 November 1998: “*nichijō no shinmitsukan ga nakereba kandōshinaishi, sogaikan ga nakereba odorokanai.*”

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