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The Profane Twain:

Mark Twain's Personal and Literary Cursing

By

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A thesis submitted to the faculty of Auburn University at Montgomery

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Matri meae, quae me legere et scribere docuit atque

Patri meo, qui omnia quae postea scripsi legit

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter

ABBREVIATIONS

AC	*The American Claimant, and Other Stories and Sketches.* New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1917.
Auto1	*The Autobiography of Mark Twain.* Ed. Charles Neider. New York: Harper Collins, 1990.
Auto2	*Autobiography of Mark Twain* Vol. 1. Harriet Elinor Smith, ed. Berkley, U of California P, 2010.
BE	*Mark Twain at the Buffalo Express: Articles and Sketches by America's Favorite Humorist.* Ed. Joseph McCoullough and Janice McIntire-Strasburg. Dekalb, Illinois: Northern Illinois UP, 1999.
CT1	*Collected Tales, Sketches, Speeches, and Essays 1852-1890.* Ed. Louis J. Budd. New York: Library of America, 1992.
CT2	*Collected Tales, Sketches, Speeches, and Essays 1891-1910.* Ed. Louis J. Budd. New York: Library of America, 1992.
EMT	*Everyone's Mark Twain.* Ed Caroline Thomas Harnsberger. New York: A.S. Barnes and Co., 1972.
Eruption	*Mark Twain in Eruption: Hitherto Unpublished Pages about Men and Events*. Ed. Bernard DeVoto. New York, Harper and Brothers, 1940.
Interviews	*Mark Twain: The Complete Interviews*. Ed. Gary Scharnhorst. Tuscaloosa: The U of Alabama P, 2006.
Laughing	*Mark Twain Laughing: Humorous Anecdotes by and about Samuel*

	L. Clemens. Ed. Paul M. Zall. Knoxville, TN: U of Tennessee P, 1987.
LOM	*Life on the Mississippi*. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1901.
MFMT	Clemens, Clara. *My Father, Mark Twain.* New York: Harper & Brothers, 1931.
MMM	*More Maxims of Mark. Ed. Merle Johnson. New York: Private Printing, 1927.*
MTHL	*Mark Twain-Howells Letters*. Ed. Henry Nash Smith and William M. Gibson. 2 vols. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1960.
MTL1	*Mark Twain's Letters.* Ed. Edgar Marquess Branch, Michael B. Frank, and Kenneth M. Sanderson. Vol. 1. Berkley: U of California P, 1988.
MTL2	*Mark Twain's Letters.* Ed. Harriet Elinor Smith and Richard Bucci. Vol. 2. Berkley: U of California P, 1990.
MTL3	*Mark Twain's Letters.* Ed. Victor Fischer and Michael B. Frank. Vol. 3. Berkley: U of California P, 1992.
MTL4	*Mark Twain's Letters.* Ed. Victor Fischer and Michael B. Frank. Vol. 4. Berkley: U of California P, 1995.
MTL5	Mark Twain's Letters. Ed. Lin Salamo and Harriet Elinor Smith. Vol. 5. Berkley: U of California P, 1997.
MTL6	*Mark Twain's Letters.* Ed. Michael B.Frank and Harriet Elinor Smith. Vol. 6. Berkley: U of California P, 2002.
MTPLetters	*Mark Twain's Letters, 1853–1880.* Mark Twain Project Online.

Berkley: U of California P, 2007. 25 October 2011.

Notebook — *Mark Twain's Notebook.* Ed. Albert Bigelow Paine. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1935.

RI — *Roughing It.* 2 vols. New York: Harper & Brothers Publishing, 1913.

Sketches — *Mark Twain's Sketches: New and Old.* Hartford, CT: The American Publishing Co, 1875.

Speaking — *Mark Twain Speaking.* Ed. Paul Fatout. Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 1976.

Speeches — *Mark Twain's Speeches.* New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1910.

SRNIE — *Some Rambling Notes of an Idle Excursion.* New York: Hard Press, 2006.

Tales — *Mark Twain: Tales, Speeches, Essays, and Sketches.* Ed. Tom Quirk. New York: Penguin Books, 1994.

TA — *A Tramp Abroad.* Leipzig: Tauchnitz, 1899.

TIHOT — *Twain in His Own Time.* Ed. Gary Scharnhorst. Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 2010.

Chapter I

Introduction

Over the past century, scholars have devoted much attention to discussions of Mark Twain's wilder side. As Leland Krauth notes in *Proper Mark Twain*, "the transgressive Twain is the most familiar and the most studied today" (3). Neither scholars nor average readers doubt that Twain was known for his subversiveness, both personally and literarily. Bruce Michelson argues in *Mark Twain on the Loose* that Twain seemed to push ideologically against anything "rigid and regulating to mind and identity: any confining orthodoxy, whether political, religious, aesthetic, imaginative, or even biological" (4). However, in the numerous studies of Twain's impropriety, virtually no one has undertaken a full examination of Twain's use of profanity, both personally and as a theme in his works. More often than not, swearing receives a mere passing mention (if that) in a larger examination focused on other, seemingly more important facets of Twain's rebellious behavior and writings. When scholars opt to mention Twain's use of profanity, they often write about it rather flippantly, holding it up as merely another example of Twain's colorfulness and then casting it aside as an otherwise unimportant detail. The lengthiest discussion of Twain's profanity appears in Gregg Camfield's 2003 work, *The Oxford Companion to Mark Twain*. In a three-page entry about "Profanity," Camfield explains away Twain's profanity as a "highly masculine art" whose primary use was to "gain power, prestige, or a business edge" (450). Like scholars before him, Camfield chooses not to probe any further into the significance of Twain's use of

profanity. Thus, Twain's use of profanity remains a fertile ground for further investigation.

To begin to study Twain's use of profanity is no small task, for while it has been largely left untouched by scholars through the decades, it is a tangled thread in a much larger and more complicated tapestry of primary and secondary sources. Before one can even begin to approach the subject, clarification is needed in defining precisely what types of language constitute profanity and swearing, two distinct yet often interchangeable categories. After limiting the focus of the study, one must consider the cultural context of American profanity in the nineteenth century and the moral attitudes regarding its usage. As Twain moved from the strict Presbyterian household of his childhood to the secular setting of the steamboat pilothouse, and from the mining camps in Nevada to the printing offices in San Francisco, his surroundings directly influenced his language. Even his shift back East and marriage to Olivia Langdon introduced new patterns in his use of profanity. After studying his outlook regarding American attitudes relating to profanity, one can begin to examine Twain's own use of foul language. The bulk of this thesis will focus on creating a thematically organized compendium of the following topics: Twain's use of profanity in his published works, either directly or as a subject matter; his personal use of profanity in private conversations; and his various speeches and letters that employ or comment on what he considered the "art" of profanity. Next, two areas of critical interest can be examined: Mark Twain's belief that profanity had poetic qualities and was in and of itself a worthy form of expression, and the metaphors that Twain employs to describe profanity. Ultimately, this thesis will provide scholars with a detailed introduction to Twain's use of profanity and its

contribution to scholarly interpretations of Mark Twain and his work, particularly regarding his underlying anger issues.

In approaching the topic of Twain's use of foul language, nomenclature becomes the first issue. How do scholars label and define the set of words constituting "profanity," and do these terms differ from the labels and definitions in Twain's day? Setting aside the historical context for a moment, the initial linguistic issue can be defined as the difference between what comprises bad language and how one goes about referring to those words or phrases. This distinction entails setting up a glossary of sorts related to the meta-language needed to discuss swearing. Renowned linguist Ruth Wajnryb provides a helpful lexicon in her book *Expletive Deleted.* In addition to providing useful categories for this study, Wajnryb provides classifications of foul language based on "meaning and achievement," since a number of words can be applied differently in numerous contexts (25). Her classifications are "made up of three broad domains of achievement—catharsis, aggression, and social connection" (25). However, as Geoffrey Hughes points out, the broad distinctions that scholars place on bad language today—the "different modes" such as "asseveration, invocation, imprecation, malediction, blasphemy, profanity, and ejaculation, with an admixture of that most complex and unstable category, obscenity"—do not necessarily take into account the linguistic evolution of types of swearing (4). In order to understand these categories within their historical context, it becomes necessary to examine the taboos in the nineteenth century.

According to Keith Allen and Kate Burridge, a taboo, which can be summarily defined as the "proscription of behavior that affects everyday life" can be seen as involving five main categories:

- Bodies and their effluvia (sweat, snot, menstrual fluid);
- The organs and acts of sex, miturition and defecation;
- Diseases, death, and killing;
- Naming, addressing, touching and viewing persons and sacred beings, objects, and places;
- Food gathering, preparation, and consumption. (1)

The focus of this thesis will be limited to Twain's use of the fourth category, which involves "naming, addressing, touching, and viewing persons and sacred beings, objects, and places." Like taboos concerning the other categories, this taboo has arisen out of "social constraints on the individual's behavior where it can cause discomfort, harm, or injury" (Allen and Burridge 1). When one violates this type of taboo, one may supposedly experience physical, metaphysical, spiritual, psychological, or social harm. In extreme circumstances, violating such taboos may even lead to death; for example, Leviticus 24 tells of the Old Testament punishment of stoning a person who curses the name of the Lord. In most cases, however, the harm translates more tangibly into some form of social rejection.

Originally, the verb "to swear" meant making a solemn declaration or promise in which the deity was called upon in order to ensure that the swearer faces grave danger if he goes back on his word. Around the middle ages, the terms "profane swearing" and "profane oaths" came into existence, and they were applied to declarations or oaths that contained profane reference to the deity (Allen and Burridge 76). Henry Woodward Hulbert traces the word "profane" back to its classical source, citing "*fane*," meaning a consecrated place, as its root word, suggesting that in its earliest usage the word

predominantly dealt with places rather than language (70). Soon, however, blasphemous usage of words replaced defilement of places, and, as Hulbert explains, "taking on one's lips the Sacred Name in an act of worship, private or public, in any light, frivolous, empty, hollow, perfunctory manner—this was indeed an abomination of desolation more heinous than any desecrating act of a conquering heathen enemy" (70). Over time, the use of irreligious language gradually evolved to include obscenities as well, and such language has been since described as "profanity" or "profane swearing." While initially the invocation of God held weighty consequences, profane swearing gradually came to be recognized more for its sound than its meaning. As Edward Echols explains, "meaning in swearing is of secondary importance; when a man is seized with an uncontrollable desire to express emotion, it is important only that his sounds shock, startle, threaten, intimidate, and ultimately carry the day for him" (291). Likewise, Hulbert estimates that 99 out of one hundred instances of profanity occur out of "sheer thoughtlessness, a matter of habit, the outcome of ignorance and bad example, and are woefully lacking in the force of utterance intended"—only one percent intentionally evokes religious terms in order to maliciously abuse the Lord's name (71).

Paradoxically, profanity is most strongly used in cultures and societies in which it is most strictly forbidden; according to Echols, "words held blasphemous have always had the greatest interjectional value; making words too holy for common use automatically makes them swearwords" (292). Robert Graves likewise observes that "the chief strength of the oath in Christian countries, and indeed everywhere, is that it is forbidden by authority" (4). There can be little surprise then that Twain, growing up in an age of religious frenzy, found profane expressions so irresistibly delicious.

In order to better define the scope of the profanity Twain utilized, personally and literarily, a few specific commonly used phrases should be examined. When one looks past the general taboos, to truly understand the usage of a word one must explore the context. Dwight Bolinger argues that peoples' various outlooks on swear words depend on "what society for the time chooses to ignore as unmentionable; they depend more upon the superstitions of the period, the sex and social station of the user, the time and circumstance of use, and the association and familiarity of the word than upon any literal meaning" (154). The context, then, of each of Twain's uses of profanity directly shaped his audience's reaction to his language. Within the context of American society during Twain's lifetime, particularly as it evolved in the south and the mid and far west, words like "God," "hell," and "damn"—three of Twain's most frequently used swear words—had surprising cultural acceptance within masculine contexts.

Presumably, taking the Lord's name in vain ought to be the strongest form of profanity since it violates the most direct religious commandment regarding strong language. In his study of early twentieth century attitudes towards swearing, particularly in secular settings, Bolinger discovered that some variations were decidedly more innocuous. While "My God!" proved problematic, the subtle variation of "Good Lord!" or "My Lord!" was occasionally acceptable for the more refined crowd (153). "God Almighty!" seemed too vigorous, but "Great Jumpin' Jehovah!" and "By the Eternal!" were, to use Bolinger's phrase, "often regarded as innocent by-words" (153). The most serious offense, however, was to directly use the name of Jesus Christ in vain. Only the roughest speakers chose to use the raw profanity of Christ's name, and even in such usages they often added letters or words in the middle, softening the directness of it by

interjecting humorous interpolations that added extra heft and energy to their profanity while simultaneously changing Christ's name, making their language a tad less sacrilegious. Roger Smith notes that such variations were particularly southern, and "Jesus H. Particular Christ" and "Jesus Hebe Christ" were two popular phrases among the more profane swearers (332).

"Hell," another popular profane word at the turn of the century, was generally considered "a trifle off-color," but according to Bolinger, it was "pretty generally used" (153). Concerned that theologians would need to find a new word to describe the fearsome place of damnation, in August of 1931, L.W. Merryweather observed that "hell fills so large a part in the American vulgate that it will probably be worn out in a few years" (qtd. in Mencken 241). Studying the frequency of the word "hell" in common usage, H.L. Mencken discovered fourteen linguistic permutations of profane usages of "hell," including "hell" as a negative adverb (as in "the hell I will"), a super-superlative (as in "colder than hell"), an adverb of work (as in "run like hell"), an intensifier of asseverations (as in "hell, yes!"), and of course a simple expletive (such as "Oh, hell!"), among others (241-242). Tracing the origin of many of these phrases in the *Dictionary of American English*, Mencken discovered that most of phrases have an American heritage (242). While usage of "hell" was distinctly milder than direct use of "God," as in "godamit," it nevertheless retained the bite of profanity—a fact proved by the continued use of euphemisms to replace it, including "heck," "blazes," and "thunder" (Mencken 242).

As with "hell," "damn" was less offensive that directly taking Christ's name in vain, but depending on the variation of usage, it could either be more or less offensive

than "hell" (Bolinger 154). Like "hell," damn also functioned in a variety of linguistic roles. In addition to being used as various parts of speech, "damn" was also a popular choice for infixing, as in "absogodamnlutely." Although "damn" was pervasive in the profane vocabularies of most early-twentieth-century swearers, it, too, carried with it a measure of shock, leading to its own set of euphemisms. In the unpublished typescript of *A Dictionary of Profanity and Its Substitutes*, M. R. Walter lists for "damn" the following popular euphemisms: "drat, bang, blame, blast, bother, darn, dang, ding," and for "damned": "all-fired, blamed, blasted, blowed, confounded, darned, dashed, cussed, danged, deuced, dinged, switched" (qtd. in Mencken 243). Once again, many of these variations are American in origin.

When Twain chose to utilize these profane swear words, he was partaking in what some scholars have called the "American language" of profanity. Twain basically believed that some things were not supposed to be suppressed, and both tobacco usage and profanity were chief among them. Like the bubbling magma that builds up pressure until it bursts through the earth's crust, the passions, energy, and anger that build and build within men find sweet release, according to Twain, only through skillful profanity. Not all English phrases are meant to fall trippingly off the tongue; some words need to be felt. Twain once observed, "If a man doesn't know that [profane] language he can't express himself on strenuous occasions. When you have that word at your command let trouble come" (*Speaking* 614). For Mark Twain, colorful language was more than mere banal cursing; it served as a fortification in instances of intense stress and provided transcendent expression for the repressed fury that could fill a person's soul.

Profanity suffused Mark Twain's life. It pervaded his private speech and his public persona. It glitters in his fiction and forms part of the deep-rooted passion that burns within his writings. In order to better understand Twain, one should examine each of the many facets of the man, and profanity is one area that is ripe for exploration.

CHAPTER II

Historical and Religious Context

There can be little doubt that the age of religious uncertainty in the Second Great Awakening (1800-1870) left much of America in a frenzy of theological turbulence that led to competing taboos. The converging religious movements as well as the social customs of the time directly influenced Twain's developing profanity. From his earliest years, Mark Twain inhabited a world of spiritual complexities. As Harold Bush explains, "Sam Clemens grew to manhood in the immediate aftermath of one of the most definitive religious eras in American history" (37). Although much has already been written (and written in great detail) about Twain's childhood and the influence of religion and contemporary society in his upbringing, it is nonetheless worthwhile to briefly review the details here, for, as Bush notes, Twain's own "religious sensibility commences with two major, competing sets of roots: the conservative Protestant evangelism that characterized his mother's set of beliefs and, more generally, his childhood in Hannibal, Missouri; and the freethinking yet deeply rational and nativist set of beliefs held by his father John" (36). As John Hays observes, "Sam Clemens's youth was spent in a welter of diverse religious opinion and belief that probably had a powerful effect in creating confusion and some disbelief in an inquiring mind" (5). The resulting juxtaposition of moral stringency with a practical rationality serves to characterize many of the locales where Twain lived and wrote. In his childhood we see a clear picture of the dichotomy that characterizes nearly every period of his life: the constant pull between the sacred and the secular, the puritanical and the bohemian; the contradiction of rigid social morays of the East and the

freedom and chaos of the West; and, ultimately, the conflict between strict moral etiquette and the blasphemous revelry of the profane.

More generally, the Clemens family background provides a plethora of contrasting convictions and values that lend insight into the complexity of Twain's self-identity. On the one hand, the Clemenses were aristocratic by blood. As a Virginian Lambton, Jane Lampton Clemens, Twain's mother, was able to claim a shadowy kinship to the earl of Durham as she was a cousin of the "heir." Twain's father, John Marshall Clemens, also claimed he was of the gentry, tracing the "noble blood" of the Clemenses through a line that was, as DeVoto so aptly puts it, "as [pure] as any other of the South's dubious genealogies" (12). According to the expectations of nobility, John Clemens went into law as a vocation and regularly dressed in a swallow-tail coat with brass buttons (Wecter 31). In order to secure a legacy for the coming generations, John Clemens purchased thousands of acres of land because land, as DeVoto again so fittingly explains, was the "everlasting rock of aristocracy" (13). Despite these noble illusions, however, the Clemens family often suffered hard times, with progressive losses in social status and financial well-being. This disparity between aspirations and means no doubt contributed to the overall incongruity that characterized Twain's childhood and the environment in which he cultivated his penchant for profanity.

On a more personal level, Twain's parents represent of set of oppositions, both in their interactions with their son and in the religious beliefs and behaviors they passed down to him. As Harold Bush notes, "in his two parents, Sam Clemens was faced with living and breathing embodiments of two competing religious sensibilities. For one thing, these two represented many of the gendered conventions of religion, as understood by

many Americans of the period" (35). In many ways, John Clemens was a figure out of reach to his son. Aloof and indifferent, John Clemens was largely unaffectionate toward his family, avoiding displays of emotion toward both his wife and children. He was, as Wecter explains, "ambitious, industrious, austere, corroded by worry and haunted by the specter of poverty" (12). Even his tall frame, unsmiling eyes, and never-laughing mouth contributed to the sense of his overall chilly disposition. Considering himself an agnostic, he avoided direct affiliation with a church and refused to adhere to a specific religious creed. Yet despite his religious freethinking, John Clemens held to strict Puritan morals, and profanity was a vice in which he seldom indulged. Wecter writes, "Almost fanatic in his scruples touching honesty, [John] Marshall Clemens was long remembered as 'sternly and irreproachably moral.' Despite a high-strung, irritable tempter … he almost never swore, and then only in white heat" (14). When it came to disciplining his children, John Clemens was both tacit and distant; Twain later wrote that his father was "ungentle of manner toward his children, but always a gentleman in his phrasing—and never punished them—a look was enough, and more than enough" (qtd. Kaplan 15). Much of the influence that John Clemens had over his son derived from the observation of manners and beliefs rather than any direct transmission of values or religion; in the formative years leading to his father's death (which occurred when Twain was a mere boy of eleven), the two never entered into any sort of lengthy conversation. Twain's own words provide the best insight into their relationship:

> My father and I were always on the most distant terms when I was a boy—a sort of armed neutrality, so to speak. At irregular intervals this neutrality was broken, and suffering ensued; but I will be candid enough

> to say that the breaking and suffering were always divided with strict impartiality between us—which is to say, my father did the breaking, and I did the suffering." (*CT1* 428)

Eventually, Twain summed their interactions as follows: "My own knowledge of him amounted to little more than an introduction" (qtd. in Kaplan 16).

If Twain's father represented a void when it came to overt participation in his son's rectitude, his mother, on the other hand, proved to be a wellspring of religious and moral instruction. Unlike the austere John Clemens, Jane was charming, lively, and impulsive; her attention to housekeeping was erratic, and she had a lifelong proclivity for homeopathic remedies, applying them especially to her delicate husband and, more often, her sickly son Samuel. Born prematurely, Twain was small and frail, and Jane later confessed that "when I first saw him I could see no promise in him" (qtd. in Powers 8). Despite her frontier fatalism, Jane Clemens had an exuberant character. She loved dancing and playing with the family's numerous cats and kittens. Although on rare occasions she could be brought to angry irruption, she generally adopted a more temperate approach when incensed. Twain recalls:

> When her pity or her indignation was stirred by some hurt or shame inflicted upon some defenseless person or creature, she was the most eloquent person I have heard speak. It was seldom eloquence of a fiery or violent sort, but gentle, pitying, persuasive, appealing; and so genuine and so nobly and simply worded and so touchingly uttered, that many times I have seen it win the reluctant and splendid applause of tears. (*Auto1* 26)

Taking more interest in her children than her husband did, Jane Clemens was often both intrigued and confounded by Twain's unpredictable mischievous behavior and idle lethargy. Although she certainly did not dote upon Twain as she did upon his brother Henry, who was the "family favorite," she nonetheless took a keen interest in Twain's religious upbringing (Wecter 82).

"Always an espouser of almost any religion," as Wecter phrases it, Jane Clemens enjoyed the piety, theology, and recreation of church (86). A family member once said that "Jane Clemens took an interest in any religion, the livelier the better. They were drama to her as much as uplift" (*MTBM* 24). Attending several protestant congregations of different denominations, Jane Clemens eventually joined the Presbyterian Church in Hannibal in 1843, and soon all of her family but her husband joined her on the membership rolls. Though perhaps not taking Calvinism and its strict moral conventions entirely to heart, she adopted the hard frontier fundamentalism through her choice of worship and therefore brought it into the lives of her children more strictly through regular church attendance than her own personal didacticism. Lawrence Berkove and Joseph Csicsila, in their extensive study about the theology in Twain's life and works, explain that "Twain's mother appears to have set her son on the course to strict orthodoxy. She decided on his religious upbringing, and as Terrell Dempsey shows, she and Twain's sister adhered to the conservative 'old school' wing of Presbyterianism which supported a stringent observance of traditional teachings" (13). Attending both Sunday school, and when he was older, Sunday sermons, Twain received from the church the "constraining, oppressive faith of frontier Presbyterianism, and he was further subjected to rigorous social codes arising from his parents', especially his father's,

pretensions to aristocracy. Both his worldview and his sense of social behavior were severely determined" by this spiritual heritage (Krauth 10). As a result, Twain was instilled with certain teachings that played a dominant role in his life and the development of his profanity.

This early exposure to religion, and particularly the theology of the Presbyterian church he attended as a young man, had a lasting influence upon Twain. Berkove and Csicsila argue that "the most significant by far of the many exposures Twain had to religions was to the Calvinism of his youth" (8). Although later he moved away from orthodoxy and direct espousal of Calvinism, in many ways "it defined him" (Berkove and Csicsila 8). "Indeed," they continue, "one of the deepest, if not the deepest, influences on Twain's artistry and his outlook on the world was his lifelong encounter with Calvinism, a fact Twain himself seems not to have fully recognized" (Berkove Csicsila 13-14). Certainly, the teachings he received during his time in the Presbyterian church of his childhood impacted his attitudes, behaviors, and beliefs. "If most other Calvinists did not show much concern about the church's doctrines," Berkove and Csicsila write, "Twain did. He took the Bible and Calvinistic doctrines seriously enough to brood over them, and to be one of that small majority of American Calvinists who internalized Calvinistic indoctrination to the degree that he denied that humans were, or even could be, free" (22). By examining these religious attitudes, particularly as they relate to profanity, one is able to better understand the context within which Twain wrestled with the development of his personal beliefs and, later, behaviors regarding this kind of language.

In many ways, despite theological revolutions within the denomination, the church provided Twain with a consistent message about the sin of profanity and idle

swearing, and throughout his childhood it admonished him to abstain from such language. A schism eventually developed in Presbyterian churches in the late 1830s, and numerous congregations such as Twains's wrestled with the efficacy of strict Calvinist theology of extreme predestination, temporarily favoring instead the "New School" theology that taught free will and embraced the revival movement. Regardless of these schisms, however, some key doctrines regarding man's spiritual and social comportment never changed. One such doctrine was the sin of profanity. For example, annals regarding the Hannibal Presbyterian church governance note that in the 1840s the elders regularly disciplined members for their worldly ways, condemning behavior such as sporadic church attendance, "acting in a revengeful manner," and, notably, "profane swearing" (Phipps 16). This teaching against swearing and profane speech had long been held by Christian, and more particularly, Protestant American churches, and Twain's own congregation was no different.

When one traces the roots of such teaching back a century, Puritans, an early American Protestant sect, provide a solid introduction to the Christian church's stance against such language. In the early 1700's, the influential Puritan minister Cotton Mather, perhaps best known for his role in the Salem witch trials, delivered a widely reprinted sermon entitled "A Golden Curb, for the Mouth, which with an Head-Strong Folly, Rules into the SIN of Profane SWEARING and CURSING." By discussing the Ten Commandments, Mather reminds his congregants that God himself forbids profanity: "Thou shalt not take the name of the LORD thy God in vain; for the LORD will not hold him guiltless that taketh his name in vain" (Ex. 20.7). Expounding upon the multitude of curses that befall those who defy God's commands, Mather cites Deuteronomy 28, 58,

and 59, explaining that "*the Lord will make thy plagues wonderful*" (2). Not only does Mather preach against the taking of the Lord's name in vain, but he speaks against "all V*ain Swearing*" (3). Touching on both profanity and idle swearing, Mather cautions that "*Vain Swearing* in ordinary Conversation, brings the *Guilt* of a yet greater *Profanity* upon the Sinner, whose *Lips* are the *Snare of his soul*; who is *Ensnared by the Transgression of his Lips*" (2). To those who chose to ignore such warnings and indulge in such language, he cautions:

> You Reproach the *Wisdom* of God; you defy the Thunderbolts of the Almighty *Law-giver*, who is *able to save and to destroy*; You forfeit the Name of, A CHRISTIAN; You Renounce a part in the Blessed and Only *Savior*; You challenge the Damnation, wherein *Everyone that Sweareth Shall be cut off.* (3)

Emphasizing the punishment in store for such sinners, Mather is blunt about the dire consequences facing the average man who swears.

Unlike other sins that entice through man's desires to satisfy his craving for pleasure, power, or prestige, profanity provides no such siren's call. Mather explains that swearing is "a Vice not *baited* with either *profit* or *pleasure*. 'Tis a sin, for which there is not the least pretence of pleasure or profit. Swearing is, as one says, *An Hook without a Bait"* (3). Not only does profanity and vain swearing profit nothing, but such language inherently brings along with it a "Chain of other Impieties Link'd unto it" (6). Mather concludes:

> A *Swearer is a Loathsome Sigh*t, an *Hateful* Sight; I did well to call him, a *Monster*. He would be thought a fashionable *Gentleman*, but he is, *A Vile*

> *Person*; and a more monstrous and ugly Spectacle, than a man *Voiding his Excrements at his mouth.* (6)

In the end, profanity and swearing do nothing to elevate a man's status; the result is quite the opposite—in the eighteenth century the swearer is condemned spiritually and socially as a "monster."

Not only were sermons against profanity and coarse language popular in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but churches also disseminated these teachings through religious tracts. While many of these publications utilized the "fire and brimstone" style seen in Mather's sermon, others combined the religious arguments with philosophy, sociology, and logic. The Protestant Episcopal Society of Young Men for the Distribution of Religious Tracts published several such tracts in the mid 1800s, including "A Tract on the Sin of Profane Swearing" printed in 1811. Significantly less vehement in its condemnation of swearing (though no less condemning), this tract approaches profanity in a slightly more dispassionate and logical manner than Mather's sermon. Beginning with a discussion of the gradual adoption of casual oaths into American speech, the tract proceeds to explore the practical arguments against this kind of language, explaining that "men accustomed to establish what they say with such [profane] proofs, are generally less believed than those who only give their word" because "common or profane swearing is a sure mark of a rash, hasty, and giddy disposition" (3-4). In addition to making others suspect the veracity of a common swearer's statements, profanity also causes him to become less trustworthy when taking a serious oath in a court of justice (4). Next, the tract categorizes into four groups speakers of profanity based on their motivations: those who swear out of habit; those who swear

because oaths are "a sounding sort of words, that make up in noise what they want in sense" (5); those who use such language because they want to "conceive a manly appearance"; and those who want blasphemous "sort of proofs that there is no truth in religion" (6). Offering both rational and religious reasons why one should abandon the use of swearing, the tract concludes with a reminder of the punishment in store for those who swear, regardless their motivation, and who refuse to repent:

> Know, O deceiver, that if there is a God, thy own horrible crime, and every other sin concealed, abetted, encouraged thereby, shall, with accumulated judgment, be fearfully punished in thee. Know, that if there is a hell, there must be thy portion for ever. For God hath sworn by his holiness that he will not hold them guiltless who profane his holy name, and think what it is to "dwell with everlasting burnings." Think of this—think, and repent. (8)

Although this passage clearly emphasizes the consequences of profanity from a spiritual standpoint, it also ends with man's choice to think, to think and then take action upon the meditation of his heart.

Another common practice in such instructive materials was to pair spiritual arguments against swearing with those of etiquette and social graces. Circulated as part of a *Series of Evangelical Tracts*, "Anecdotes and Hints, Relative to the Prevailing but Indefensible Practice of Profane Swearing," speaks to both the religious and social factors in one's language. It begins with the following poem:

> It chills my blood to hear the blest Supreme,
> Rudely appeal'd to on each trifling theme!

> Maintain your rank; vulgarity despise;
>
> To SWEAR , is neither brave, polite nor wise:
>
> You would not swear upon the bed of death;
>
> Reflect! Your Maker now could stop your breath! (1)

This poem references both social class, with the word "rank," and the larger spiritual context, implied with "Maker" as a name for God. Here as elsewhere throughout this tract, these two ideas are consistently interwoven, subtly arguing that swearing offends a holy God and a righteous gentleman alike. In fact, rather than beginning with scriptures that forbid profanity, the author of this tract creates fictitious scenes where the main character encounters unwelcome swearing and gently and politely convinces the speaker to abandon such language. Introducing an even more pious character, the fourth scene centers around a man who is so extremely cautious in his avoidance of profanity that he pauses before he says the name of God:

> The truly honorable Mr. Boyle, as eminent for philosophy as for morality, was so careful to avoid this profane custom, that he never mentioned the name of God in his conversation, without making an observable pause before it, that he might both feel and diffuse among the company, the veneration due to the Sacred Majesty of the universe. (2)

Mr. Boyle is aware of the spiritual ramifications of taking the Lord's name in vain, but he is also aware that he is in the presence of others, and he must be wary lest they misinterpret his language. Furthermore, his audience provides him with a teaching moment in which he argues against profanity, not with words, but with his actions—the long pause—that reminds those around him of the gravity of God's name.

Repeatedly throughout the tract, the author counters the popular notion that profanity and various forms of artful swearing imply a sort of aristocratic gentility among men of means. In fact, profanity implies the exact opposite of gentility. Using class conscious language, he writes:

> It is vulgar.—That some gentlemen swear, is too true; but it can never be deemed the mark of a gentleman; for it is a vice common to the vilest characters in the lowest ranks of society. It produces the most disgraceful equality—it puts the honorable, the learned, the polished, and the delicate, upon a level with the most ignorant and depraved. (3)

Moreover, profanity, while undermining gentility in men, also degrades the refinement of a noblewoman to that of the common chamber maid. Men, though likely the primary audience of this text, were not the only sex guilty of profanity:

> Besides those horrid oaths which shock every decent ear, [profanity] is a vicious habit, indulged by many persons, otherwise moral, and among these, even by ladies themselves, of a thoughtless profanation of their Maker's name, on occasions the most trivial, such as Good God! God forbid! God bless us! O Lord, &c. This is inexcusable conduct, and proceeds from want of that reverence to the best of Beings, which is essential to true religion, and is as direct a violation of that command, "Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord they God in vain," as the most vulgar and profane oaths. (4)

Once again social class and spiritual precepts lie side by side. The author chooses the word "ladies," as opposed to "women" or "females," because of the connotations of

social class and refinement, for a lady is a refined woman exhibiting manners, courtesy, and decorum. One can almost picture the genteel ladies in their long skirts and linen gloves, gossiping around the teapot in the parlor, with the occasional casual ejaculation of "Good God!" escaping their lips when they hear an especially delicious tidbit. This image is juxtaposed with the solemn commandment from the Holy Scriptures, immediately adding gravitas to the discussion and undermining the "trivial" nature of the ladies' profanity.

Altogether, then, both God and civility dictate that the refined gentleman or lady refrain from profanity and idle swearing. The author concludes that a man "may wear a fine coat, and have his pockets filled with money, he may be high in office, and in those applauses which a vain world has to bestow," but when he is profane, the author writes, "I am authorised, I am compelled to pronounce him grossly deficient in the feelings and behavior of a *gentleman*" (7).

While texts like these primarily address the religious ramifications of swearing and touch on issues of gentility and the social graces for men and women, a few even discuss profanity creeping into the vocabulary of young people. Published in the form of a short letter, "Advice Against Swearing" provides a glimpse into a society where profanity increasingly permeates the language of all ages, classes, and genders. It reads:

> Dear Friends,
>
> Having for many years been grieved at hearing the dreadful oaths, profane swearing and obscene language from every age and sex, particularly among the youth; and in the course of my reading have met with many religious pieces setting forth this great evil—one, in particular,

which claims my serious attention, is this, which, with some small additions and alteration, is as follows.

BECAUSE OF SWEARING THE LAND MOURNETH.

Jeremiah, Chap. 23. verse x.

As I have often, in passing along the streets and highways, heard the most sacred Name very profanely made use of, both by men, women, and the youth, and many grievously calling for damnation on themselves and on one another; my heart has been, and is deeply afflicted thereat; and therefore I beseech you, in the name of Jesus Christ, do not defile your Souls, which are dear and precious, by any wilful [sic] sin: and, amongst other things, do not take the holy name of God in vain, for the Lord will not hold him or her guiltless that taketh his holy name in vain.

God would save you, why would any of you lose and destroy yourselves? Observe this attentively, for notwithstanding all what the Lord has done, and is doing for us, such as die in their sins, where he is gone, they can never come. Abstain from Drunkenness and all excess, and from every appearance of evil, love one another, as Jesus Christ hath loved you, apply yourselves to the witness of God within you, which reproves you for evil; submit to and obey its holy manifestations and discoveries, and it will do much more for you, than all you can hear from any man; this witness of God is the word of his Grace—even the word of Life, which is able to save your souls. In the love of the Gospel, I invite you all to come and

> taste how good and merciful the Lord is, towards all those, that return to him with their whole hearts. (2-4)

Perhaps even more grievous to the author than swearing alone is the sound of foul language passing out of no-longer-innocent young lips. Commenting on the sad state of affairs, he explains that he hears "swearing and obscene language from every age and sex, particularly among the youth." Unfortunately, children had adopted the vices of their elders, and profanity was no longer bound to class, gender, or age.

A third source of teaching regarding profanity came in the form of books of etiquette and manuals about manners, many of which were bought and sold in the country store kept by Twain's father. Appealing to a parent or guardian's sense of social grace, these texts delineated the behaviors and expectations of young boys and girls within certain social and economic classes. Interestingly, these texts appealed as much to ethics and morality as they did to status and culture. One such text that was widely popular (with fifty-seven editions printed since its initial publication) was John Todd's *Student's Manual; Designed, By Specific Directions, to Aid in Forming and Strengthening the Intellectual and Moral Character and Habits of the Student.* Originally published in New England in 1835, *Student's Manual* provides commentary on the role of profanity in the lives of refined men and women. Beginning with the social repercussions of a spiritual offense, Todd argues that taking the Lord's name in vain indicates a selfish heart that should not be trusted:

> He who can speak lightly of God, his Maker, and his best Friend, or of any thing that pertains to him, will always be known to carry a heart that will easily yield to a temptation to treat an earthly friend in the same way. You

> may set it down as a rule to which there are no exceptions, that he who treats religion, or any of the ordinances of his God, with lightness and irreverence, carries a selfish heart, and is not fit to be your bosom friend. Levity of manner, or matter, in regard to sacred things, will ruin your character, or that of any other man. (208)

Not only does Todd caution his readers not to use profane language, he also warns them not to associate with those who indulge in such a sin. Profanity, he argues, reveals a heart of evil and narcissism, and certainly no well-mannered and God-fearing person should speak in that way. Employing the rhetorical strategy of ethos, or an appeal to character, Todd cites a well-respected eighteenth-century gentleman and expert on manners to support his claim:

> Lord Chesterfield, who is universally quoted as a master in the school of politeness, declares that such language is never that of a gentleman. When you hear any one use profane language, you will not wrong him if you conclude, that this is only one of a nest of vipers which he carries in his heart; and although this is the only one which now hisses, yet each, in his turn, is master of the poor wretch who is giving his life-blood to feed them. (209)

This metaphor of profanity as a viper within one's heart provides insight into Todd's supposition that profanity acts as a sort of gateway sin. Although profanity initially seems rather harmless, a snake that does nothing but hiss, it later leads to greater sins that attack and feed off one's soul. In a similar vein, Todd writes,

> Every approach to any thing like profaneness ought, at once and forever, to be banished. If you wish to fit yourself for the dark world, it will be time enough to learn its language after you have prepared for it by more decent sins. I am happy to say, that an oath is now seldom heard among people who lay any claim to respectability, and that I have not heard one for years, except where I had evidence that it was stimulated, and was borne on breath tainted and poisoned by ardent spirit. Politeness needs not embellishments which belong to spirits accursed; and truth and sincerity always despise and disdain such auxiliaries. (210)

Though not as damning as other sins, profanity is nonetheless the "language" of the "dark world," and the "embellishments" of casual swearing "belong to the spirits accursed." Thus, while such language may seem initially innocuous, it acts as the portal into darker and more spiritually disastrous sins. As a result, Todd cautions against even the smallest and most infrequent use of coarse or profane language:

> Make it a part of your daily habits to cultivate your conscience. A man never became intemperate or profane at once. He never became proficient in any sin by a single leap. The youth first hears the oath, blushes as he falters out his first profane expression, and goes on, step by step, till he rolls "sin as a sweet morsel under his tongue." It is so with any sin. In this way, the conscience is blunted and the heart hardened. (304)

In order to keep their consciences clean and their comportment appropriate, young men, Todd recommends, ought to avoid all use of profanity.

Admonitions against swearing, particularly those intended for children, were not only present in religious talks, tracts, and books of manners, but such messages were also integrated into the daily school-room curriculum. In an era when didacticism permeated children's literature, moral lessons were frequently combined with the rudiments of reading, spelling, and other classroom subjects. "Book learning and piety, day school and Sunday school," Wecter explains, "went hand in hand through the weeks" (85). As McGuffey's *Eclectic Reader* replaced the standard "horn books" and the *New England Primer*, students began reading selections from Biblical texts as well as contemporary novelists as fodder for their growing literacy. Twain's own experience with the McGuffey's Reader proved to be foundational in his religious worldview. Ron Powers asserts that the Reader "established the primacy of the Bible as a cornerstone of his intellectual edifice—indeed, of his very consciousness. Biblical verses and parables formed the essential texts of the McGuffey's earliest editions" (26-27). McGuffey's Second Reader, which was designed for younger students, featured many lessons dealing with Biblical texts or principles, and the young Twain doubtless read through its pages many times as he studied the Reader with his teacher, Miss Mary Ann Newcomb, at the "Select School" in a Hannibal church basement (Wecter 84). Lesson 84, titled "About Using Profane Language," is a Bible-based lesson focusing on the Ten Commandments, and it deals directly with the issue of swearing and taking the Lord's name in vain:

> 1. All children know what is meant by profane swearing; yet, but few understand the nature and extent of the guilt incurred by it.
>
> 2. If any of you had a very dear friend, who had bestowed many valuable gifts upon you, and to whom you felt the warmest gratitude, and who was entitled

to your most profound respect on account of his moral excellencies of character; you would not use the name of that friend in a disrespectful manner, nor could you hear it so by another, without the greatest pain.

3. It would be base ingratitude in *you,* to use it lightly; and he would have but little regard for your feelings, who would thus use it in your presence.

4. But God has been kinder to us than *all* our earthly friends. He has bestowed upon us such favors as we can never hope to return, or confer upon any others; gratitude is the only return we can make.

5. He is the very *fountain* of all moral excellence, and therefore can never be sufficiently venerated. Will you then, my young reader, treat God as you would not treat a friend? There is not one among you, who could bear to be thought ungrateful. Will you therefore show more unpardonable ingratitude to your Creator, than you *can* to any relation or earthly benefactor?

6. You all know, that as you become familiar with any object, however beautiful, or striking it may be, you cease to consider it as a matter of interest and importance. You could all crowd to see an exhibition of artificial fire-works, while you scarcely think of the sun—the most glorious of all fire-works,—at least as an object of curiosity.

7. Now if we love our country, we must respect the name of the Deity, for the profane man can never recognize the sanctity of an oath, for the same reason that you do not feel admiration and astonishment at the sight of the sun. Then if oaths be not binding, we will have no means of eliciting truth in our courts of justice, or of binding men to a performance of duty, in offices of high importance.

> 8. Besides all these considerations, God has given an express command, "Swear not at all." We have religion, honor, gratitude and patriotism, and *God himself,* all forbidding profanity. (162-163)

Using plain language, a logic-based structure, and a variation of the Socratic method, the Reader instructs students about the nature of profanity and why such language is inappropriate. Not only does McGuffey use the rhetorical method of logos (or logic) in this lesson, asking questions and then leading his readers through the steps to properly answer those questions, but he also adds an interesting layer of ethos. While other texts preaching against profanity appealed to the spiritual and social ramifications of using such language, McGuffey appeals to the student's sense of patriotism as well. "If we love our country," he writes, "we must respect the name of the Deity." Whereas the preachers argued, "if you are a Christian, you must not use profanity" and the etiquette books instructed, "if you are a gentleman, you must not use profanity," now, the school curriculum teaches, "if you are an American, you must not us profanity." Not only did the school curriculum provide spiritual and secular instruction, but it inculcated students regarding the anti-patriotism of profanity as well.

CHAPTER III

Profanity in Hannibal and on the Mississippi River

While the church and the prevalent social mores of the nineteenth century provided injunctions against profanity, there were other voices that encouraged Twain by example to adopt a freer attitude toward his language and the profane. Throughout his formative years, these conflicting voices, speaking most often in vernacular, directly shaped his personal use of profanity and would later come to influence some of Twain's most memorable fiction. In particular, three settings affected Twain's attitudes toward profanity: First, Twain's childhood in Hannibal under the Presbyterianism of his mother led to an initial dichotomy. On the one hand, profanity as seen from his mother's eyes was an undeniable sin, and under no circumstance was it suitable for feminine company. Yet profanity, as Twain encountered it as a small boy in Hannibal, was a sort of rite of passage (similar to tobacco usage) that brought with it entrance into the masculine world of work and respect. Later, when Twain became a cub pilot and spent years on the Mississippi around sailors, bargemen, and deckhands, he encountered strains of profanity that were seemingly productive in their functions and contributed to a job well done. Here profanity appeared to be as necessary as sweat and labor in accomplishing a day's work. Finally, when Twain moved west, he experienced a brand of profanity that served to distinguish hardened insiders from the tenderfoot easterners. To embrace profanity was to deliberately and symbolically reject the affectations and norms of high society. In these complicated settings, profanity was both embraced and sometimes abhorred, depending on the locale and situation.

Hannibal

A burgeoning town on the Mississippi, Hannibal centered around small industry and river traffic. By 1844, Hannibal could boast about both the depth and breadth of its business; it featured, among other establishments, "two pork houses … four general stores, three sawmills, two planning mills, three blacksmith shops, two hotels, three saloons, two churches, two schools, a tobacco factory, a hemp factory, and a tanyard, as well as a flourishing distillery up at the stillhouse branch" (Wecter 60). Familiar with these businesses and the language utilized by their workers, Sam Clemens at one time or another served as a delivery boy, bookseller's assistant, grocer's clerk, drugstore worker, and blacksmith's hand (Wecter 131). In this variety of settings Clemens encountered a much more liberal attitude towards the use of profanity than what was taught in schools and churches. Wavering between a Western frontier mentality and an Eastern sense of deportment, the people of Hannibal generally followed the "do as I say and not as I do" approach in respect to profanity. For example, one of the earliest city ordinances, approved in 1845, deemed that any "boisterous laughing, bellowing, hallowing, swearing, profane, indecent or obscene language" that disturbed the peace was punishable as a misdemeanor (qtd. in Wecter 155). However, in spite of such an ordinance, profanity and other rough language could be frequently heard wafting on the breeze from both boys at their play and men at their work. As Wecter aptly concludes, "plainly this ordinance was often violated, in the rough and tough life of a river town" (155). Among both the old and young people in Hannibal, Hamilton Mabie noted in 1907, "there was a good deal of profanity, drinking, and loafing, but the more sophisticated forms of immorality were unknown" (650).

In the general town atmosphere, Clemens was regularly exposed to rigorous swearing and profanity. For example, the *Journal* published an article on March 10, 1849 bemoaning the town's youth who had lost all manners regarding moral speech:

> A gang of boys...are in the habit of congregating themselves about the crossing of Main and Bird streets after dark, and keeping a constant uproar until the late hour of the night, by making use of the most obscene language, and belching forth the most vulgar oaths and imprecations. (qtd. in Wecter 156)

Because Clemens was never unequivocally named in any of these gathering, his direct involvement in such gangs is unclear. However, given his "low-down tastes," one can easily assume that he was not altogether unfamiliar with such groups and their language (Wecter 75). Furthermore, because Clemens worked at a printing shop less than a block away from the regular meeting grounds of these gangs of boys, Wecter argues that his observation of their behavior and profanity is highly probable (156).

More directly, as a boy Clemens influenced and was influenced in turn by both his own band of boys and his classmates at school. Although the December 24, 1846 issue of the Hannibal *Gazette* instructed "the Boys" not to associate with those that use "filthy language," profanity time and time again proved to be a sort of rite of passage for Clemens and his young male friends (qtd. in Wecter 133). Rather than directly advising the boys to abstain from profanity, the *Gazette*, perceptive regarding the importance of peer-influence on moral development, encouraged young men to avoid peers who use such language and who would likely encourage others (either directly or by example) to speak in a similar manner. For many boys in Clemens's peer group, profanity, like

tobacco usage, was recognized as a milestone towards adulthood and brought with it entrance into the masculine world of work and respect. Albert Bigelow Paine, in his biography of Twain, notes that this peer pressure and emulation of adults frequently directed Clemens's behaviors so that it was "no wonder that at nine he was no longer 'Little Sam,' but Sam Clemens, quite mature and self-dependent, with a wide knowledge of men and things and a variety of accomplishments" (51). Giving readers a glimpse at one such encounter, Paine explains that

> [Clemens] had even learned to smoke—a little—out there on the farm, and had tried tobacco chewing, though that was a failure. He had been stung to this effort by a big girl at a school which, with his cousin Puss, he sometimes briefly attended.
>
> "Do you use terbacker?" the big girl had asked, meaning did he chew it.
>
> "No," he said, abashed at the confession.
>
> "Haw!" she cried to the other scholars; "here's a boy that can't chaw terbacker."
>
> Degraded and ashamed, he tried to correct his fault, but it only made him very ill; and he did not try again. (51)

Not only does this exchange prove insightful regarding the voices of those who influenced young Clemens, but it informs readers about one of the methods by which adult vices spread amongst adolescents: peer pressure. In addition to his life-long tobacco addiction, from his boyhood companions Clemens also acquired "the use of certain strong, expressive words, and used them, sometimes, when his mother was safely

distant" (Paine 51). As Paine humorously observes, young Clemens "had an impression that [his mother] would 'skin him alive' if she heard him swear. His education had doubtful spots in it, but it had provided wisdom" (51).

Despite his family's pretensions of aristocracy, Clemens generally preferred playmates of a lower socio-economic class. Speaking of his childhood preference for slaves and rednecks as childhood companions, Clemens once remarked that he was "a person of low-down tastes from the start, notwithstanding my high birth, and ever ready to forsake the communion of high souls if I could strike anything near my grade" (qtd. in Wecter 75). Finding amusement in the "ultimate dregs of Hannibal society, the town drunkards," Clemens had numerous encounters with Jimmy Finn, a member of the Blankenship clan who later appeared in Clemens's fiction as Huck's father (Wecter 150). Known as the "profanest man in town," Finn was once adopted as a pet project by John Marshall Clemens, Clemens's father (Wecter 150). However, unable to reform Finn, Clemens's father had to resign his mission, leaving his son and his friends to enjoy the language and antics of the profane man.

While employed as printer's devil for Joseph Ament and the Hannibal *Gazette* and its successor, the *Missouri Courier,* Clemens formed a fast friendship with his loud and lusty fellow apprentice Wales McCormick. A connoisseur of swearing and profanity in his own right, McCormick was known for his slow-burning anger, but when he was ignited, he was, as Clemens writes, "a reliable burner when well going" (qtd. in Wecter 205). McCormick's "baritone voice was equally fine for singing to its own accompaniment or for 'swearing in nine languages'" (Wecter 205). As Twain wrote in his *Autobiography* (2010), McCormick "was a reckless, hilarious, admirable creature; he had

no principles, and was delightful company" (556). Elaborating upon McCormick's mischievous nature, Clemens continues,

> I have said that Wales was reckless, and he was. It was the recklessness of ever-bubbling and indestructible good spirits flowing from the joy of youth. I think there wasn't anything that that vast boy wouldn't have done to procure five minutes' entertainment for himself. One never knew where he would break out next. Among his shining characteristics was the most limitless and adorable irreverence. There didn't seem to be anything serious in life for him; there didn't seem to be anything that he revered. (457)

McCormick, with his jovial recklessness and irreverence, provides another example of the type of swearing that Clemens was exposed to in Hannibal. The good-spirited mischievousness of using certain words when one ought not to particularly made profanity an amusing and rebellious vice.

Perhaps the best illustration of this type of profanity can be found in the anecdote of McCormick and the printing of "Jesus H. Christ." During Clemens's time as a printer's devil for Ament, Alexander Campbell, the famous founder of the newly emerging Protestant sect called the Campbellites, visited Hannibal and held open-air church services. In his *Autobiography* (2010), Twain recalls:

> [Campbell] preached a sermon on one of these occasions which he had written especially for that occasion. All the Campbellites wanted it printed, so that they could save it and read it over and over again, and get it by heart. So they drummed up sixteen dollars, which was a large sum

then, and for this great sum Mr. Ament contracted to print five hundred copies of that sermon and put them in yellow paper covers. It was a sixteen-page duodecimo pamphlet, and it was a great event in our office. As we regarded it, it was a book, and it promoted us to the dignity of book printers. Moreover, no such mass of actual money as sixteen dollars, in one bunch, had ever entered that office on any previous occasion. People didn't pay for their paper and for their advertising in money, they paid in dry-goods, sugar, coffee, hickory wood, oak wood, turnips, pumpkins, onions, watermelons—and it was very seldom indeed that a man paid in money, and when that happened we thought there was something the matter with him.

We set up the great book in pages—eight pages to a form—and by the help of a printer's manual we managed to get the pages in their apparently crazy but really sane places on the imposing-stone. We printed that form on a Thursday. Then we set up the remaining eight pages, locked them into a form and struck a proof. Wales read the proof, and presently was aghast, for he had struck a snag. And it was a bad time to strike a snag, because it was Saturday; it was approaching noon; Saturday afternoon was our holiday, and we wanted to get away and go fishing. At such a time as this, Wales struck that snag and showed us what had happened. He had left out a couple of words in a thin-spaced page of solid matter and there wasn't another break-line for two or three pages ahead. What in the world was to be done? Overrun all those pages in order to get

in the two missing words? Apparently there was no other way. It would take an hour to do it. Then a revise must be sent to the great minister; we must wait for him to read the revise; if he encountered any errors we must correct them. It looked as if we might lose half the afternoon before we could get away. Then Wales had one of his brilliant ideas. In the line in which the "out" had been made occurred the name Jesus Christ. Wales reduced that to J.C. It made room for the missing words, but it took 99 percent of the solemnity out of a particularly solemn sentence. We sent off the revise and waited. We were not intending to wait long. In the circumstances we meant to get out and go fishing before that revise should get back, but we were not speedy enough. Presently that great Alexander Campbell appeared at the far end of that sixty-foot room, and his countenance cast a gloom over the whole place. He strode down to our end and what he said was brief but it was very stern, and it was to the point. He read Wales a lecture. He said "So long as you live, don't you ever diminish the Savior's name again. Put it all in." He repeated this admonition a couple of times to emphasize it, then he went away.

In that day the common swearers of the region had a way of their own of emphasizing the Savior's name when they were using it profanely, and this fact intruded itself into Wales's incorrigible mind. It offered him an opportunity for a momentary entertainment which seemed to him to be more precious and more valuable than even fishing and swimming could afford. So he imposed upon himself the long and weary and dreary task of

> overrunning all those three pages in order to improve upon his former work and incidentally and thoughtfully improve upon the great preacher's admonition. He enlarged the offending J.C. into Jesus H. Christ. Wales knew that that would make prodigious trouble, and it did. But it was not in him to resist it. He had to succumb to the law of his make. I don't remember what his punishment was, but he was not the person to care for that. He had already collected his dividend. (*Auto2* 457-458)

Although the substitution of "J.C." for the Lord's name began primarily out of a sort of layout necessity (though additionally providing an obvious undercutting of the awe the public invested in Alexander Campbell was by no means an unwelcome side effect), the later addition of "H." to the name represented deliberate defiance of the overly austere preacher, his harsh admonitions, and his reverence for the Lord's name. As Roger Smith explains, McCormick's "joke turned upon the *H*. Only the *H* was irreverent, because adding to the Lord's name for any reason was as impious as diminishing it" (332). Discussing the arrival of "Jesus H Christ" on American soil and tracing the phrase through folk etymology, Smith suggests that the usage of "IHS" or "ICH" on early Anglican vestments led to a rudimentary association between the savior's name and a mysterious "H" in the middle (332). Those who chose to use Christ's name in a less-than-pious manner often found that drawing out the phrase "Jesus Christ" with an extra syllable, or sometime even an extra word, added additional punch and energy to their language, and the "H" soon evolved into various words, as in the following usages: Jesus Henry Christ, Jesus Holy Christ, Jesus Harold Christ, Jesus H Particular Christ, Jesus

Hebrew Christ, and Jesus Hebe Christ (Smith 332). Focusing in on McCormick's variation, Smith observes,

> As for Twain's friend McCormick, if his practical joke is the first printed instance of Jesus H. Christ, we can credit him with the period after the H. It was a brilliant stroke. The period reinvests the letter with graphic power, now distinct from the original eta's power in the sacred monogram but a power nevertheless, the power of taking the Lord's name in vain by adding something to it that the imagination is invited to complete: What does the H. stand for?—whatever the errant imagination proposes and the imaginer is disposed to enjoy. THAT is impiety. Seldom has a single punctuation mark so deftly called attention to the basis for a curse. (334)

Here Smith focuses in on the particular brand of ingenious profanity that Clemens encountered in this event. McCormick's addition of "H." seemed to encompass and imply any numerous amounts of interpolations because the mystery of the letter, especially with the period at the end which implies abbreviation, is left to the wild and profane imagination of the reader. Not only was McCormick guilty of profanity with his emendation, but in the most roguish of manners he causes the reader to become guilty as well, for who in reading the text could resist wondering what words the "H." might stand for?

Mississippi River

As notions of Manifest Destiny encouraged Americans' movement toward the West Coast, many American authors joined in the travelling craze, discovering unique

pockets of regional voices along the way. In a movement known as Regionalism, these authors attempted to realistically capture local culture, color, and language in their writing. While regionalist writers were sometimes known for "exploiting the romantic appeal of strange customs and outlandish dialects," as A. Walton Litz explains, their use of local color reinforced American national unity and expressed a "truth" that could "only be found in the rhythms and figures of local speech" (221). As rough and rugged as the terrain that they described, the language these writers employed when quoting the males they encountered along the frontier was often filled with colloquialisms, slang, misspellings, and profanity. For Sam Clemens, who would be later known for his regionalist works of the American south and west, regional profanity represented a unique language of its own; not only did the profanity of the steamboat pilot and the miner accurately represent "the vigorous new vernacular" of the common man, but it also represented an art form in and of itself (*Roughing It* 28). When profanity was well-used, Mark Twain believed it was "sublime" and well-worth envying ("I Want to Be a Cub Pilot" 96). For Twain, the profanity he encountered during his travels represented a uniqueness that kept American culture and, more particularly, American speech, interesting.

Flowing through Hannibal and down through other Southern frontier towns, the Mississippi River, along with its regular traffic of barges, riverboats, gamblers, and good-for-nothings, brought new attitudes and patterns of speech into the life of Sam Clemens. While the men of the Mississippi Valley had inherited traditional ideas of conduct from their American and immigrant ancestors, they also developed new styles of speaking, abandoning the rigid formality of genteel conventions in favor of less sophisticated but

more expressive vernacular. Blunt and brutal honesty replaced euphemism and polite hem-hawing. Writing for *The Outlook* in 1907, Hamilton Mabie discusses this new speech that "gained in vigor and vividness what it lost in breadth of expression" (650). He writes:

> On the river a vast and appalling profanity was developed, but it was less a matter of conscious irreverence than of surplus imagination and a primitive instinct for the picturesque. A few oaths are binding, many are loosening; and the profanity of the Mississippi Valley was largely "giving the imagination a loose." Conditions were hard and work was harder; vocabularies were limited and, beyond the demands of routine activity, inadequate; exigencies of all kinds evoked a variety and force of expression to which the resources of profanity were equal. In the Far East cursing is a solemn and elaborate ritual of imprecation, casting the shadow of a terrible blight on one's remotest ancestors and projecting it over one's farthest descendants. It shadows one's entire racial career. In the Mississippi Valley, on the other hand, cursing was mainly an illicit use of picturesque language, or a reckless excursion into the realms of humor. Life was essentially fraternal and kindly; a broad, genial humor underlay and enfolded it, and much of the profanity was fundamentally humorous. Its interest lay in the striking effects of broad contrasts; it reveled in audacious comparisons, far-fetched similes, epithets that overflowed with suggested insult. (650)

While Mabie's observations slant towards the rosy, he nevertheless captures the *laissez-faire* attitudes adopted regarding swearing and profanity. Whereas in the East a gentleman would be judged harshly for his loose language, here on the river such words allowed for full expression of one's emotions and often brought both wrath and humor intertwined.

Such profanity also served a practical purpose in one's day-to-day exertions. When Clemens became a cub pilot and spent years on the Mississippi around sailors, bargemen, and deckhands, he encountered strains of profanity that were seemingly productive in their functions and contributed to a job well done. Before the advent of the steamboat, big keel boats often used "sails, mule power, and profanity" to move their loads (*TA* 113). Here profanity appeared to be as necessary as sweat and labor in accomplishing a day's work, and the rivermen were quick to teach Clemens this skill. In his biography of Mark Twain, Albert Bigelow Paine, having access not only to Twain's papers but also to the man himself, expounds upon the lessons in language that Clemens acquired on the Mississippi. He writes,

> Clemens acquired other kinds of knowledge. As the streets of Hannibal in those early days, and the printing offices of several cities, had taught him human nature in various unvarnished aspects, so the river furnished an added course to that vigorous education. Morally, its atmosphere could not be said to be an improvement on the others. Navigation in the West had begun with crafts of the flat-boat type—their navigators rude, hardy men, heavy drinkers, reckless fighters, barbaric in their sports, coarse in their wit, profane in everything. Steamboatmen were

> the natural successors of these pioneers—a shade less coarse, a thought less profane, a veneer less barbaric. But these things were mainly "above stairs." You had but to scratch lightly a mate or a deck-hand to find the old keel-boatman savagery. Captains were overlords, and pilots kings in this estate; but they were not angels. In *Life on the Mississippi* Clemens refers to his chief's explosive vocabulary and tells us how he envied the mate's manner of giving an order. It was easier to acquire those things than piloting, and, on the whole, quicker. One could improve upon them, too, with imagination and wit and a natural gift for terms. That Samuel Clemens maintained his promise as to drink and cards during those apprentice days is something worth remembering; and if he did not always restrict his profanity to moments of severe pressure or sift the quality of his wit, we may also remember that he was an extreme example of a human being, in that formative stage which gathers all as grist, later to refine it for the uses and delights of men. (Paine 127)

Like Mabie's, Paine's description also ends with a touch of rosy glow, asking readers to generously excuse Clemens's profane indulgences as mere caprice during his "formative stage which gathers all as grist," remembering that such swearing would later be refined in the literature of the more mature and genteel writer. Such excuses aside, however, Paine's picture of the rivermen and their thin veneer of decorum provides a much more multi-faceted description of the men Clemens interacted with on a daily basis. This complex and seeming contradictory juxtaposition between cultured affectation and daily use of profanity and swearing was both obvious to those who observed it and immaterial

to those who used profane language. One such example can be found in the character of Horace Bixby, the famous steamboat pilot who later took Clemens on as a cub pilot and taught him the river.

When Clemens was interviewing for the position, Bixby asked him, "Do you swear?" and Clemens replied, "Not for amusement; only under pressure," giving an answer that was both perfunctory and satisfying to his mentor (qtd. in Powers 75). While Bixby was concerned that Clemens did not needlessly indulge in the use of profanity, Bixby was also an appreciative master of such language, using it both "under pressure," as Clemens phrased it, and in times of general frustration. In Chapter 6 of *Life on the Mississippi*, Twain writes of one instance during his time training with Bixby when his irritated mentor erupted in intense and weighty profanity:

> It was a rather dingy night, although a fair number of stars were out. The big mate was at the wheel, and he had the old tub pointed at a star and was holding her straight up the middle of the river. The shores on either hand were not much more than half a mile apart, but they seemed wonderfully far away and ever so vague and indistinct. The mate said:—"We've got to land at Jones's plantation, sir."
>
> The vengeful spirit in me exulted. I said to myself, I wish you joy of your job, Mr. Bixby; you'll have a good time finding Mr. Jones's plantation [on] such a night as this; and I hope you never WILL find it as long as you live. Mr. Bixby said to the mate:—"Upper end of the plantation, or the lower?"
>
> "Upper."

"I can't do it. The stumps there are out of water at this stage: It's no great distance to the lower, and you'll have to get along with that."

"All right, sir. If Jones don't like it he'll have to lump it, I reckon."

And then the mate left. My exultation began to cool and my wonder to come up. Here was a man who not only proposed to find this plantation on such a night, but to find either end of it you preferred. I dreadfully wanted to ask a question, but I was carrying about as many short answers as my cargo-room would admit of, so I held my peace. All I desired to ask Mr. Bixby was the simple question whether he was ass enough to really imagine he was going to find that plantation on a night when all plantations were exactly alike and all the same color. But I held in. I used to have fine inspirations of prudence in those days.

Mr. Bixby made for the shore and soon was scraping it, just the same as if it had been daylight. And not only that, but singing—"Father in heaven, the day is declining," etc.

It seemed to me that I had put my life in the keeping of a peculiarly reckless outcast. Presently he turned on me and said:—"What's the name of the first point above New Orleans?"

I was gratified to be able to answer promptly, and I did. I said I didn't know.

"Don't KNOW?"

This manner jolted me. I was down at the foot again, in a moment. But I had to say just what I had said before.

"Well, you're a smart one," said Mr. Bixby. "What's the name of the NEXT point?" Once more I didn't know.

"Well, this beats anything. Tell me the name of ANY point or place I told you."

I studied a while and decided that I couldn't.

"Look here! What do you start out from, above Twelve-Mile Point, to cross over?"

"I—I—don't know."

"You—you—don't know?" mimicking my drawling manner of speech. "What DO you know?"

"I—I—nothing, for certain."

"By the great Caesar's ghost, I believe you! You're the stupidest dunderhead I ever saw or ever heard of, so help me Moses! The idea of you being a pilot—you! Why, you don't know enough to pilot a cow down a lane."

Oh, but his wrath was up! He was a nervous man, and he shuffled from one side of his wheel to the other as if the floor was hot. He would boil a while to himself, and then overflow and scald me again.

"Look here! What do you suppose I told you the names of those points for?"

I tremblingly considered a moment, and then the devil of temptation provoked me to say:—"Well—to—to—be entertaining, I thought."

This was a red rag to the bull. He raged and stormed so (he was crossing the river at the time) that I judge it made him blind, because he ran over the steering-oar of a trading-scow. Of course the traders sent up a volley of red-hot profanity. Never was a man so grateful as Mr. Bixby was: because he was brim full, and here were subjects who would TALK BACK. He threw open a window, thrust his head out, and such an irruption followed as I never had heard before. The fainter and farther away the scowmen's curses drifted, the higher Mr. Bixby lifted his voice and the weightier his adjectives grew. When he closed the window he was empty. You could have drawn a seine through his system and not caught curses enough to disturb your mother with. Presently he said to me in the gentlest way—"My boy, you must get a little memorandum book, and every time I tell you a thing, put it down right away. There's only one way to be a pilot, and that is to get this entire river by heart. You have to know it just like A B C."

That was a dismal revelation to me; for my memory was never loaded with anything but blank cartridges. However, I did not feel discouraged long. I judged that it was best to make some allowances, for doubtless Mr. Bixby was "stretching." Presently he pulled a rope and struck a few strokes on the big bell. The stars were all gone now, and the night was as black as ink. I could hear the wheels churn along the bank, but I was not entirely certain that I could see the shore. The voice of the invisible watchman called up from the hurricane deck—"What's this, sir?"

> "Jones's plantation."
>
> I said to myself, I wish I might venture to offer a small bet that it isn't. But I did not chirp. I only waited to see. Mr. Bixby handled the engine bells, and in due time the boat's nose came to the land, a torch glowed from the forecastle, a man skipped ashore, a darky's voice on the bank said, "Gimme de k'yarpet-bag, Mars' Jones," and the next moment we were standing up the river again, all serene. I reflected deeply awhile, and then said—but not aloud—"Well, the finding of that plantation was the luckiest accident that ever happened; but it couldn't happen again in a hundred years." And I fully believed it was an accident, too. (*LOM* Chapter 6)[1]

Initially, Bixby's language is characterized by mild euphemisms, such as when he exclaims, "By the great Caesar's ghost, I believe you! You're the stupidest dunderhead I ever saw or ever heard of, so help me Moses!" However, one must consider whether such bowdlerization occurs on the part of the speaker (Bixby) or the writer (Twain), for certainly Twain's subscription-book audience would not have allowed him to print excessive and explicit profanity and swearing. Later, Twain implies that Bixby's language becomes much more graphic, noting that "an irruption followed as I never had heard before. The fainter and farther away the scowmen's curses drifted, the higher Mr. Bixby lifted his voice and the weightier his adjectives grew." Doubtless, with Clemens's frequent exposure to swearing and profanity in Hannibal and on the river, Bixby's language must have been intense and uniquely uninhibited for Clemens to observe that he had never before heard such an intense eruption of swearing. Yet when his passion

passes, Bixby once again assumes a refined demeanor, speaking to Clemens in the "gentlest way."

Bixby was not the only man on the river who was both genteel and profane. In Chapter 25 of *Life on the Mississippi*, Twain also introduces readers to a good-hearted yet profane character known as "Uncle Mumford." Twain writes:

> Uncle Mumford has been thirty years a mate on the river. He is a man of practical sense and a level head; has observed; has had much experience of one sort and another; has opinions; has, also, just a perceptible dash of poetry in his composition, an easy gift of speech, a thick growl in his voice, and an oath or two where he can get at them when the exigencies of his office require a spiritual lift. He is a mate of the blessed old-time kind; and goes gravely damning around, when there is work to the fore, in a way to mellow the ex-steamboatman's heart with sweet soft longings for the vanished days that shall come no more. "GIT up there you! Going to be all day? Why d'n't you SAY you was petrified in your hind legs, before you shipped!" (*LOM* Chapter 25)

Although he has a "level head" and "practical sense," Mumford easily slips into swearing and profanity when there is work to be done. However, despite his language, the veneer of refinement ironically remains.

Not all rivermen possessed the same panache as Bixby and Mumford exhibited. In particular, small-town bargemen with their great flat wooden rafts were noted for the crudeness and the prodigiousness of their language. When these crafts encountered the lumbering steamboats on the river, often times it was to the detriment of the smaller

crafts. Upon such scrapes, a volley of profanity was a common occurrence. Twain recalls one instance where a bullet, in addition to the fiery language, accompanied such a meeting:

> Of course, on the great rise, down came a swarm of prodigious timber-rafts from the head waters of the Mississippi, coal barges from Pittsburgh, little trading scows from everywhere, and broad-horns from "Posey County," Indiana, freighted with "fruit and furniture"—the usual term for describing it, though in plain English the freight thus aggrandized was hoop-poles and pumpkins. Pilots bore a mortal hatred to these craft; and it was returned with usury. The law required all such helpless traders to keep a light burning, but it was a law that was often broken. All of a sudden, on a murky night, a light would hop up, right under our bows, almost, and an agonized voice, with the backwoods "whang" to it, would wail out—
>
> "Whar'n the——you goin' to! Cain't you see nothin', you dash-dashed aig-suckin', sheep-stealin', one-eyed son of a stuffed monkey!"
>
> Then for an instant, as we whistled by, the red glare from our furnaces would reveal the scow and the form of the gesticulating orator as if under a lightning-flash, and in that instant our firemen and deck-hands would send and receive a tempest of missiles and profanity, one of our wheels would walk off with the crashing fragments of a steering-oar, and down the dead blackness would shut again. And that flatboatman would be sure to go into New Orleans and sue our boat, swearing stoutly that he had

> a light burning all the time, when in truth his gang had the lantern down below to sing and lie and drink and gamble by, and no watch on deck. Once, at night, in one of those forest-bordered crevices (behind an island) which steamboatmen intensely describe with the phrase "as dark as the inside of a cow," we should have eaten up a Posey County family, fruit, furniture, and all, but that they happened to be fiddling down below, and we just caught the sound of the music in time to sheer off, doing no serious damage, unfortunately, but coming so near it that we had good hopes for a moment. These people brought up their lantern, then, of course; and as we backed and filled to get away, the precious family stood in the light of it—both sexes and various ages—and cursed us till everything turned blue. Once a coalboatman sent a bullet through our pilot-house, when we borrowed a steering oar of him in a very narrow place. (*LOM* Chapter 10)

Not only does Twain recreate the unique combinations of words and images that consisted of the raftsmen's profanity, but in the true spirit of Regionalism, he also notes the "backwoods 'whang' to it," indicating that this particular use of profanity was spoken by a local voice. In this scene both the crew of the raft and the crew of steamboat exchange "a tempest of missiles and profanity," and their behavior seems typical of the encounters between such vessels. When the steamboat comes upon another hidden raft, this time belonging to a country family, profanity once again characterizes the encounter. Twain expresses no surprise that the members of the family on the raft, including "both sexes and various ages," all "cursed us till everything turned blue." Regardless of age or

sex, passengers and sailors alike on the Mississippi were free in their use of choice words.

In addition to the exchanges of swearing and profanity that occurred when steamboats and rafts drifted too close together at night, similar language regularly occurred with another typical encounter between these kinds of crafts. Twain tells of the customary exchange of literature and profanity in the following anecdote:

> You will hardly believe it, but many steamboat clerks always carried a large assortment of religious tracts with them in those old departed steamboating days. Indeed they did. Twenty times a day we would be cramping up around a bar, while a string of these small-fry rascals were drifting down into the head of the bend away above and beyond us a couple of miles. Now a skiff would dart away from one of them, and come fighting its laborious way across the desert of water. It would "ease all," in the shadow of our forecastle, and the panting oarsmen would shout, "Gimme a pa-a-per!" as the skiff drifted swiftly astern. The clerk would throw over a file of New Orleans journals. If these were picked up without comment, you might notice that now a dozen other skiffs had been drifting down upon us without saying anything. You understand, they had been waiting to see how No. 1 was going to fare. No. 1 making no comment, all the rest would bend to their oars and come on, now; and as fast as they came the clerk would heave over neat bundles of religious tracts, tied to shingles. The amount of hard swearing which twelve packages of religious literature will command when impartially divided up among twelve

> raftsmen's crews, who have pulled a heavy skiff two miles on a hot day to get them, is simply incredible. (*LOM* Chapter 11)

Once again, swearing was a typical outcome of these encounters as raftsmen, desperate for news from the big city, were often duped into laboring in the hot sun for nothing more entertaining than a packet of old religious tracts.

Up and down the Mississippi, profanity could be heard from the mouths of pilots, deckhands, raftsmen, and even the occasional passenger. But such language was not always limited to human voices. In Chapter 48 of *Life on the Mississippi*, Twain writes of an avian crew member whose cries were joyously profane:

> We could have done a number of other things; but on account of limited time, we went back home. The sail up the breezy and sparkling river was a charming experience, and would have been satisfyingly sentimental and romantic but for the interruptions of the tug's pet parrot, whose tireless comments upon the scenery and the guests were always this-worldly, and often profane. He had also a superabundance of the discordant, ear-splitting, metallic laugh common to his breed—a machine-made laugh, a Frankenstein laugh, with the soul left out of it. He applied it to every sentimental remark, and to every pathetic song. He cackled it out with hideous energy after "Home again, home again from a foreign shore," and said he "wouldn't give a damn for a tug-load of such rot." Romance and sentiment cannot long survive this sort of discouragement; so the singing and talking presently ceased; which so delighted the parrot that he cursed himself hoarse for joy.

Hearing the coarse and crude language day in and day out, the parrot soon augmented his own vocabulary with a plethora of expletives. When the mood was sentimental and the setting romantic, the parrot would let loose such a thundercloud of profanity and swearing so that even the most enthusiastic or maudlin passenger couldn't withstand such a barrage. In the end, the parrot was so self-satisfied that he "cursed himself hoarse" for the pleasure of deflating the party-atmosphere with his harsh and abundant profanity.

Notes

1. Because page numbering greatly varies between different editions of *Life on the Mississippi*, for easier reference I am providing chapter numbers instead of page numbers.

CHAPTER IV

Profanity in the West

After the civil war stopped all civilian river traffic, Twain followed his brother Orion out west where the elder Clemens brother was appointed Secretary of the Nevada Territory. There Twain experienced a clash of strict (and often self-righteous and hypocritical) Calvinism and wild frontier bohemianism. Leland Krauth explains that "the western world Clemens entered was itself remarkably fluid. From the physical state of its camps and towns to its mixed economies to its social order, the west was in flux" (17). He continues,

> This instability offered opportunities, but also posed problems. The economic, social, political, and cultural lines along which one usually lived must often have seemed in the Nevada Territory to have been drawn in sand. The institutions and values of the East were replicated in the West, and those who believed in them often upheld them with a stridency that suggests desperation. But there were also new systems, new values, that vied with the old. Clemens experienced this creative collision, sometimes to his dismay, often to his delight. (Krauth 17)

Whenever a division came about either within these systems or between them, whether the division was related to religion, class, gender, or other societal dividers, a social taboo often sprang up, and with the taboo came new attitudes towards profanity.

Averaging nearly a hundred miles a day, the overland stagecoach from St. Joseph to Carson City, Nevada introduced Twain to his first real visions of the West, and from

the outset profanity proved to be as regular of a companion on the journey as Twain's own brother. A few days into the journey, the stage's thoroughbrace broke. Twain writes that "something gave away under us. We were dimly aware of it but indifferent to it. The coach stopped. We heard the driver and conductor talking together outside and rummaging for a lantern and swearing because they could not find it" (*RI* 29). Although Twain does not dwell on the explicit ejaculations caused by the missing lantern and broken thoroughbrace, a conscientious reader can at once infer that such language was by no means out of the ordinary. When the party stopped to camp, Twain comments on the usefulness of sage-brush for campfires, citing among its chief merits for cooking the fact that it burns with "no smoke and consequently no swearing" (*RI* 34). As the coach gradually moved into the wilder country, it regularly stopped at a station where the stage-driver would "[utter] his one jest—old as the hills, coarse, profane, witless, and inflicted on the same audience, in the same language, every time his coach drove up there" (*RI* 40). The language at the station's breakfast table was no cleaner. When Twain asks for coffee, the station-master, after a short period of speechlessness, exclaims, "Coffee! Well, if that don't go clean ahead of me, I'm d—d!" (*RI* 45). The general table conversation was no better. Twain writes:

> It was always in the same form, and always gruffly friendly. Its western freshness and novelty startled me, at first, and interested me; but it presently grew monotonous, and lost its charm. It was:
>
> "Pass the bread you son of a skunk!" No, I forget—skunk was not the word; it seems to me it was still stronger than that; I know it was, in fact, but it is gone from my memory, apparently. However, it is no

> matter—probably it was too strong for print anyway. It is the landmark in my memory which tells me where I first encountered the vigorous new vernacular of the occidental plains and mountains. (*RI* 45)

While propriety and censorship are more to blame for the lost word than Twain's "memory," the raw freshness of the man's profanity stuck with Twain indelibly. He notes that this station-house was the "landmark" of his first real experience with the wild and free swearing of the West, the "vigorous new vernacular" of the native Westerner's profanity.

The longer Twain was in the west, the more quickly he acclimatized to the unrestricted language of the natives, and soon both the stagecoach driver and Twain himself were freely swearing. Crossing through the dessert, the stage, now pulled by mules rather than horses, seems powered as much by the profanity of the driver as the labor of the mules. Twain recalls:

> The mules, under violent swearing, coaxing and whip-cracking, would make at stated intervals a "spurt," and drag the coach a hundred or may be two hundred yards, stirring up a billowy cloud of dust that rolled back, enveloping the vehicle to the wheel-tops or higher, and making it seem afloat in a fog. Then a rest followed, with the usual sneezing and bit-champing. Then another "spurt" of a hundred yards and another rest at the end of it. All day long we kept this up, without water for the mules and without ever changing the team ....
>
> Two miles and a quarter an hour for ten hours—that was what we accomplished. It was hard to bring the comprehension away down to

> such a snail-pace as that, when we had been used to making eight and ten miles an hour. When we reached the station on the farther verge of the desert, we were glad, for the first time, that the dictionary was along, because we never could have found language to tell how glad we were, in any sort of dictionary but an unabridged one with pictures in it. (*RI* 144)

Once again, Twain confesses to one form of uncouth language, namely the driver's use of "violent swearing" which was necessary to urge the mules forward, while indirectly alluding to a more traditionally inexcusable use of profanity, the idle profanity on the part of the passengers with their implied "Thank God that is over!" and other more colorful expressions that were fictitiously supplied by the dictionary.

Finally arriving at his destination, Twain discovered a western setting that voraciously lived up to its epithet of "wild." For many, "swearing, drinking and card playing were the order of the day, and occasionally a fight was thrown in for variety" (*RI* 220). James Caron, writing of the atmosphere in Virginia City, explains that "ubiquitous reminders of wealth transformed Virginia City into a place where disregard for the usual boundaries for behavior flourished, a place where wild-eyed speculation and incessant practical joking blended with routine violence and rampant vice to produce an ambience of intoxicating freedom" (90). On average, these western towns were carnivalesque, on the one hand filled with constant adventure, quick winnings, unheard-of violence, illicit behavior, and endless drunken debauchery. Yet on the other hand, many of these towns rather soon supported schools, churches, and social organizations that embraced culture and refinement. Faced with this juxtaposition between the honorable activities of the day and the scandalous goings-on between dusk and dawn, Twain was inevitably pulled

towards the unconventionality of western life. In the heyday of the Sacramento Valley, Twain describes the typical scene:

> a fiercely-flourishing little city, of two thousand or three thousand souls, with its newspaper, fire company, brass band, volunteer militia, bank, hotels, noisy Fourth of July processions and speeches, gambling hells crammed with tobacco smoke, profanity, and rough-bearded men of all nations and colors, with tables heaped with gold dust sufficient for the revenues of a German principality—streets crowded and rife with business—town lots worth four hundred dollars a front foot—labor, laughter, music, dancing, swearing, fighting, shooting, stabbing—a bloody inquest and a man for breakfast every morning—*everything* that delights and adorns existence—all the appointments and appurtenances of a thriving and prosperous and promising young city. (*RI* 414)

In a setting full of hyperbole, profanity and other vices thrived alongside with patriotism, goldlust, and fierce self-reliance. Not only could such language be found in saloons and gambling halls, but it could also be heard on the streets, in places of business, and even in private homesteads.

Because of such a widespread use of swearing and profanity, natives judged newcomers not by their abstinence from such language (as was the custom in the East), but by their proficiency in such language. Many a new arrival found to his dismay that in the mining communities there existed a brand of profanity that served to distinguish hardened insiders from the tenderfoot easterners. To embrace profanity was to

deliberately and symbolically reject the affectations and norms of high society and be "western." Twain writes:

> Perhaps the reader has visited Utah, Nevada, or California, even in these latter days, and while communing with himself upon the sorrowful banishment of these countries from what he considers "the world," has had his wings clipped by finding that *he* is the one to be pitied, and that there are entire populations around him ready and willing to do it for him—yea, who are complacently doing it for him already, wherever he steps his foot. Poor thing, they are making fun of his hat; and the cut of his New York coat; and his conscientiousness about his grammar; and his feeble profanity; and his consumingly ludicrous ignorance of ores, shafts, tunnels, and other things which he never saw before, and never felt enough interest in to read about. And all the time that he is thinking what a sad fate it is to be exiled to that far country, that lonely land, the citizens around him are looking down on him with a blighting compassion because he is an "emigrant" instead of that proudest and blessedest creature that exists on all the earth, a "FORTY-NINER." (*RI* 119-20)

Proud of their lack of refinement, the miners cultivated their crude and coarse language and ridiculed and dismissed in turn the newer tenderfoot for his "feeble profanity."

During his time timber-prospecting, Twain began to further reinforce his habit of swearing. In a letter to his brother, Twain references some of the promises he made to his mother back East. As Gregg Camfield observes, Twain's letters sent to his mother by way of Orion often "tease her with the suggestion that his ears are at least assaulted by

the degrading and immoral sounds of blasphemous profanity, which he implicitly includes through his careful use of dashes to only partially obscure the profanity" (450). While Twain redirects the "guilt" of profanity onto his companion, John Kinney, the conscientious reader can easily surmise that in all actuality these two roles were reversed. Of the trip to the ranch and later to Lake Bigler, Twain writes:

> John D. Kinney, a Cincinnati boy, and a first-rate fellow, too, who came out with Judge Turner, was my comrade. We staid at the Lake four days—I had plenty of fun, for John constantly reminded me of Sam Bowen when we were on our campaign in Missouri. But first and foremost, for *Annie's,* Mollie's, and Pamela's comfort, be it known that I have never been guilty of profane language since I have been in this Territory, and Kinney hardly ever swears.—But *sometimes* human nature gets the better of him. On the second day we started to go by land to the lower camp, a distance of three miles, over the mountains, each carrying an axe. I don't think we got *lost* exactly, but we wandered four hours over the steepest, rockiest and most dangerous piece of country in the world. I couldn't keep from laughing at Kinney's distress, so I kept behind, so that he could not see me. After he would get over a dangerous place, with infinite labor and constant apprehension, he would stop, lean on his axe, and look around, then behind, then ahead, and then drop his head and nominate awhile. Then he would draw a long sigh, and say: "Well—could any Billygoat have scaled that place without breaking his————neck?" And I would reply, "No,—I don't think he could." "No —you don't think he could—" (mimicking

> me,) "Why don't you *curse* the infernal place? You know you *want* to.—*I* do, and *will* curse the ——— thieving country as long as I live." Then we would toil on in silence for awhile. Finally I told him—"Well, John, what if we *don't* find our way out of this today—we'll know all about the country when we *do* get out." "Oh stuff—I know enough—and *too much* about the d—d villainous locality already." (*MTL1* 124-125)

As Ivan Benson writes of the dubious shift of profanity from one likely culprit onto a unknown one, "in light of a wider acquaintance with Mark Twain, the reader of this letter today will be permitted to draw his own conclusions as to which of these two young men was doing the most of the swearing around the shores of Lake Bigler in those pioneer days" (32). Without a doubt, Twain had taken liberties with the facts and placed his own language into the mouth of his friend, a fact so obvious that his family, too, likely saw through his playful ploy.

Other letters Twain wrote in the 1860's contain both explicit profanity as well as numerous direct references to it. For example, in a letter to his fellow miner William Clagett, Twain curses his relocation, and later in the letter, offers a profane prayer for a departed dog. Twain writes:

> Damn the day I left Unionville before there was any necessity for it. For I have been sitting here swearing like a trooper ever since I arrived .... Oh, d—n that dog. He was always an ungrateful brute. Still, we stole him, and it was but natural that we should overlook his faults and love the long-legged son-of-a-bitch anyhow. But Alas, poor Tom! He had a good, kind countenance, and a tender heart, and a long nose—and he was always

> cold. But he hath gone the way of the beautiful—even as the flowers, that bloom, and wither and die, and are seen no more forever. Peace to his ashes, and damnation to his destroyer. Amen. (*MTL1* 163-164)

In this letter, Twain's swearing functions in part as a means of "social connection," to use Wajnryb's classification, for his audience shares his attitudes towards profanity, and by swearing, Twain forms a further bond with Clagett.

While Twain wrote more frequently and extensively about the profanity he encountered on the Mississippi, he nevertheless regarded the western miner's language to be some of the most varied, hard, and profane swearing he had ever encountered. Even when they intended to be reverent and tender, the miners unconsciously peppered their language with profanity. A well-known inscription on the tombstone of a widely-respected and loved miner provides a perfect illustration; the inscription read, "Here lies the body of Joe Smith who died ... (date). He done his damnest; angels could do no more" (qtd. in Hulbert 72). Writing for the *Buffalo Express* years later, Twain published a short tale about western miners, highlighting at the end their proficiency in profanity:

> In Tuolumus lived two miners who used to go to the neighboring village in the afternoon and return every night with household supplies. Part of the distance they traversed a trail, and nearly always sat down to rest on a great boulder that lay beside the path. In the course of thirteen years they had worn that boulder tolerably smooth, sitting on it. By and by two vagrant Mexicans came along and occupied the seat. They began to amuse themselves by chipping off flakes from the boulder with a sledge-hammer. They examined one of these flakes and found it rich with gold. That

> boulder paid them $800 afterward. But the aggravating circumstance was that these "Greasers" knew that there must be more gold where that boulder came from, and so they went panning up the hill and found what was probably the richest pocket that region has yet produced. It took three months to exhaust it, and it yielded $120,000. The two American miners who used to sit on the boulder are poor yet, and they take turn about in getting up early in the morning to curse those Mexicans—and when it comes down to pure ornamental cursing, the native American miner is gifted above the sons of men. (*BE* 114)

In a wild land with such hard luck as for years walking past a mountain filled with gold and never profiting a cent while others strike it rich, men needed language that could express the crude and rugged conditions and allowed them to articulate their own boorish responses to their lot in life.

Twain was not the only American regionalist writer to take note of the wild profanity of the miners. His one-time friend and fellow writer Bret Harte also spent a brief time in the west, trying his hand at prospecting before later moving to San Francisco to focus on his writing. In one of his most famous short stories, "The Luck of Roaring Camp" (1870), Harte describes a profane, uncouth, dirty, violent, and even criminal band of miners who adopt the orphaned baby of the camp's prostitute. When one of the miners, a man known as "Kentuck," bends over the resting baby, the child unconsciously reaches out and grab's the man's finger, causing the old minor to exclaim, "The d—d little cuss!"(6). While the baby later receives a name, for a while he retains the nickname of, what Harte calls, "Kentuck's endearing diminutive ... 'the d—d little cuss'" (10). When

the baby is christened, Stumpy, the miner who has been acting as the baby's godfather, declares, "I proclaim you Thomas Luck, according to the laws of the United States and the State of California, so help me God" (11). Commenting on Stumpy's speech, Harte notes that "it was the first time that the name of the Deity had been otherwise uttered than profanely in the camp" (11). Yet in spite of their profanity, the swearing miners of Roaring Camp soon prove to be heroes in their own right, and in the end they are reformed to a degree by the presence of the innocent babe, a fact which reveals that their blackness of language did not necessarily equate to a blackness of heart.

Just as the profanity of the steamboat pilots and deckhands on the river gradually influenced the surrounding animal populace, resulting in a parrot's penchant for profanity, so too did the miners' language get absorbed by the westerner's feathered friends. In his short story "The Blue Jay Yarn," Twain recalls a character named Jim Baker, a "middle-aged, simple-hearted miner who had lived in a lonely corner of California" and who professes to have the ability to speak with birds and beasts (*TA* 19). Of the many animals with whom he has conversed, Baker argues that "there's more to a bluejay than any other creature" (*TA* 19). Baker narrates the story, continuing:

> He has got more moods, and more different kinds of feelings than other creatures; and mind you, whatever a bluejay feels, he can put into language. And no mere commonplace language, either, but rattling, out-and-out book talk—and bristling with metaphor, too—just bristling! And as for command of language—why you never see a bluejay get stuck for a word. No man ever did. They just boil out of him! (*TA* 19)

Not only is the bluejay proficient with grammar and metaphors, the bluejay, as a sign of his ultimate humanity, is also quite a capable swearer. Baker explains,

> Now, on top of all this, there's another thing; a jay can outswear any gentleman in the mines. You think a cat can swear. Well, a cat can; but you give a bluejay a subject that calls for his reserve powers, and where is your cat! Don't talk to me—I know too much about this thing. And there's yet another thing; in the one little particular of scolding—just good, clean, out-and-out scolding—a bluejay can lay over anything, human or divine. Yes, sir, a jay is everything that a man is. (*TA* 20)

In the course of the tale, a bluejay discovers a knot hole in the roof of an abandoned cabin and attempts to fill the hole (and therefore unknowingly the entire cabin) with acorns. Frustrated by the futility of the many acorns he drops into the hole, the bluejay begins to get mad. Baker explains that

> [the bluejay] held in for a spell, walking up and down the comb of the roof and shaking his head and muttering to himself; but his feelings got the upper hand of him, presently, and he broke loose and cussed himself black in the face. I never see a bird take on so about a little thing. When he got through he walks to the hole and looks in again for half a minute; then he says, "Well, you're a long hole, and a deep hole, and a mighty singular hole altogether—but I've started in to fill you, and I'm d—d if I don't fill you, if it takes a hundred years!" (*TA* 24)

In the end, the bluejay's profanity overtakes even the renowned language of the miner. Baker explains that the bluejay "just had strength enough to crawl up onto the comb and

lean his back agin the chimbly [sic], and then he collected his impressions and begun to free his mind. I see in a second that what I had mistook for profanity in the mines was only just the rudiments, as you may say" (*TA* 24-25). Soon, there is a whole chorus of bluejays, peering into the hole until, as Baker reports, "pretty soon this whole region 'peared to have a blue flush about it. There must have been five thousand of them; and such another jawing and disputing and ripping and cussing, you never heard" (*TA* 25).

When Twain began to work in newspaper and printing offices, he encountered profanity that reflected the incongruity of the class system in which he moved. One day he would spend the morning slumming in the drunk-tanks for stories, and the next he would dine with governors and the politically elite. In this complicated, setting profanity was both embraced and sometimes abhorred. Arthur McEwan provides the perfect illustration of this juxtaposition. In his 1893 newspaper article, McEwan writes about Twain's time at the *Enterprise*, his friendships with preachers, and the trouble his profanity caused:

> Mark, being a man of sense, never neglected his interests. The fact that to know a particular man might at some time be advantageous did not deter Mr. Clemens from making his acquaintance. He and the Episcopal clergyman became friends, and while the clergyman probably did not consider Sam a devout Christian, at least he regarded him as a promising young man whose leanings were in the right direction. Now, the printers knew that to steal the shade of Mr. Clemens' lamp caused him to burn with a slow fury. So they stole it as often as they could for the pleasure of hearing him swear—an art in which he excelled. One evening at dusk he

climbed to the deserted local room and found the shade gone. Thereupon he began to drag himself around in a leisurely but intense circle, as was his wont on such occasions, uttering oaths and calling down heaven's vengeance upon the purloiners. While thus breathing maledictions he passed the door and beheld the Episcopal minister standing therein transfixed with horror.

Mark paused not in his slow walk but had the grace to drawl out in low ferocity this (expurged) excuse:

"I know you are shocked to hear me, Mr. Brown. It stands to reason you are. I know this ain't language fit for a Christian man to utter nor for a Christian man to hear, but if I could only lay my hands on the

_____ __ _____ ___ ___ ___ _____ _____

who stole my shade, I'd show you what I'd do to him, for the benefit of printers to all time. You don't know printers. Mr. Brown; you don't know them. A Christian man like you naturally can't come in contact with them, but I give you my word they're the _____ _____ _____ ___ _____ _____that a body ever had anything to do with."

From that time on Mark's seat was not high in the synagogue. (McEwan 252-253)

As one would expect, the minister did not share the same appreciation and enjoyment of Twain's profanity as the printers did.

During his time in the West, Twain was regularly "encouraged" by his friends and fellow newspaper men to cultivate his own voice for profanity through its frequent use.

Paine points to Stephen E. Gillis as one of Twain's companions at the Western newspaper who facilitated the writer's use of profanity. Paine writes:

> Among the *Enterprise* compositors was one by the name of Stephen E. Gillis (Steve, of course—one of the "fighting Gillises"), a small, fearless young fellow, handsome, quick of wit, with eyes like needle-points. "Steve weighed only ninety-five pounds," Mark Twain once wrote of him, "but it was well known throughout the Territory that with his fists he could whip anybody that walked on two legs, let his weight and science be what they might." Clemens was fond of Steve Gillis from the first. The two became closely associated in time, and were always bosom friends; but Steve was a merciless joker, and never as long as they were together could he "resist the temptation of making Sam swear," claiming that his profanity was grander than any music. (Paine 213)

Speaking as both a biographer and an eyewitness to Twain's profanity, Paine cannot help but digress from his tale in order to deliver his own firsthand account of Twain's language. Such a digression should be generously allowed here, too, for a better understanding of Twain's use of swear words lends itself to a better understanding of Steve Gillis's "temptation" to get Twain to swear. Paine explains:

> Born with a matchless gift of phrase, the printing-office, the river, and the mines had developed it in a rare perfection. To hear him denounce a thing was to give one the fierce, searching delight of galvanic waves. Every characterization seemed the most perfect fit possible until he applied the next. And somehow his profanity was seldom an offense. It was not mere

> idle swearing; it seemed always genuine and serious. His selection of epithet was always dignified and stately, from whatever source—and it might be from the Bible or the gutter. Some one has defined dirt as misplaced matter. It is perhaps the greatest definition ever uttered. It is absolutely universal in its application, and it recurs now, remembering Mark Twain's profanity. For it was rarely misplaced; hence it did not often offend. It seemed, in fact, the safetyvalve of his high-pressure intellectual engine. When he had blown off he was always calm, gentle, forgiving, and even tender. Once following an outburst he said, placidly: "In certain trying circumstances, urgent circumstances, desperate circumstances, profanity furnishes a relief denied even to prayer." (Paine 213-214)

With Paine's description of the "fierce, searching delight of galvanic waves" that resulted from Twain's swearing, it is no stretch to believe the accuracy of Gillis's claim that Twain's "profanity was grander than any music."

Owing to his pleasure in Twain's musical profanity, Gillis often engaged in mischievous practical jokes designed to make his friend and roommate explode into profound outbursts of swearing. One such incident occurred in the spring of 1864 when Twain and Gillis worked as a reporter and compositor, respectively, for the San Francisco *Morning Call*. Paine writes that even after a long day on the job, Twain often struggled to fall asleep, and he sought remedy in reading of various books, much to the frustration of his roommate Gillis:

Clemens, however, was never quite ready for sleep. Then, as ever, he would prop himself up in bed, light his pipe, and lose himself in English or French history until sleep conquered. His room-mate did not approve of this habit; it interfered with his own rest, and with his fiendish tendency to mischief he found reprisal in his own fashion. Knowing his companion's highly organized nervous system he devised means of torture which would induce him to put out the light. Once he tied a nail to a string, an arrangement which he kept on the floor behind the bed. Pretending to be asleep, he would hold the end of the string, and lift it gently up and down, making a slight ticking sound on the floor, maddening to a nervous man. Clemens would listen a moment and say:

"What in the nation *is that noise*?"

Gillis pretended sleep and the ticking would continue.

Clemens would sit up in bed, fling aside his book, and swear violently.

"Steve, what *is* that d—d noise?" he would say.

Steve would pretend to rouse sleepily.

"What's the matter, Sam? What noise? Oh, I guess that is one of those death-ticks; they don't like the light. Maybe it will stop in a minute."

It usually did stop about that time, and the reading would be apt to continue. But no sooner was there stillness than it began again—tick, tick, tick. With a wild explosion of blasphemy, the book would go across the floor and the light would disappear. Sometimes, when he couldn't sleep,

> he would dress and walk out in the street for an hour, while the cruel Steve slept like the criminal that he was.
>
> At last, one night, he overdid the thing and was caught. His tortured room-mate at first reviled him, then threatened to kill him, finally put him to shame. It was curious, but they always loved each other, those two; there was never anything resembling an estrangement, and to his last days Mark Twain never could speak of Steve Gillis without tenderness. (Paine 254-255)

Delighted by his companion's language, Steve would resort to all kinds of underhanded means to get Twain's goat.

In addition to amusing himself with Twain's profanity, Gillis would often team up with Twain in order to incite profanity from others. Such practical jokes were popular among printers, miners, and frontier townspeople in general. James Caron notes that "all types of jokes were rife" during this period (96). One such popular practical joke with Twain and Gillis included throwing bottles on the tin roofs of their neighbors. Paine writes:

> They moved a great many times in San Francisco. Their most satisfactory residence was on a bluff on California Street. Their windows looked down on a lot of Chinese houses—"tin-can houses," they were called—small wooden shanties covered with beaten-out cans. Steve and Mark would look down on these houses, waiting until all the Chinamen were inside; then one of them would grab an empty beer-bottle, throw it down on those tincan roofs, and dodge behind the blinds. The Chinamen would swarm

> out and look up at the row of houses on the edge of the bluff, shake their fists, and pour out Chinese vituperation. By and by, when they had retired and everything was quiet again, their tormentors would throw another bottle. This was their Sunday amusement. (255-256)

Regardless of whether the swearing was in English or Chinese, both Twain and Gillis found a distinct pleasure in a well-earned and righteous vulgarity.

There can be little doubt that such exposure to profanity and such frequent personal practice as Gillis incited in him left Twain a master of the art by the time he left the west. In an anecdote with the typical western tall-tale flair, Paine writes of a final incident between Twain and Gillis in which Twain lets loose a volcanic blast of profanity at a neighborhood dog that is disturbing the peace:

> At a place on Minna Street they lived with a private family. At first Clemens was delighted.
>
> "Just look at it, Steve," he said. "What a nice, quiet place. Not a thing to disturb us."
>
> But next morning a dog began to howl. Gillis woke this time, to find his room-mate standing in the door that opened out into a back garden, holding a big revolver, his hand shaking with cold and excitement.
>
> "Come here, Steve," he said. "Come here and kill him. I'm so chilled through I can't get a bead on him."
>
> "Sam," said Steve, "don't shoot him. Just swear at him. You can easily kill him at that range with your profanity."

> Steve Gillis declares that Mark Twain then let go such a scorching, singeing blast that the brute's owner sold him next day for a Mexican hairless dog. (265)

Humorous exaggeration aside, during his time in the West Twain developed a masterful command of the profane.

Unfortunately, many direct examples of Twain's use of language during this time were expunged from the record. Twain's "verbal and literary violence," as Krauth phrases it, was largely mitigated during the writing and revising of *Roughing It* (42). An earlier travel narrative than *Life on the Mississippi, Roughing It* was published at a time when Twain was still developing confidence as a writer in relation to the New England literati, and his trepidation about admitting to such generally condemned language influenced this censorship. However, more than sufficient evidence remains to paint a clear picture of the wild, wild, western Twain.

In his travels, Twain encountered all forms of regional profanity, from the creative to the sublime, the masterful to the masterless; however, each instance of profanity reflected a bit of the culture and verbal heritage of its local speaker. From the backwoods twang found on the upper stretch of the Mississippi to the slow, thundering drawl of the south, from the sailors of the Atlantic to the miners and stagecoach drivers of the Pacific, each voice raised in profanity contributed to the American national identity. And as Twain worked to realistically recreate these regional voices, he developed a voice of his own, cultivating a unique brand of profanity that was entirely his own. Already an artist with words, Twain embraced this new language, elevating the profane and reminding Americans across the country that colorful words could be as beautiful and

meaningful as colorful brush-strokes on a canvas. After all, he seems to ask, what is really so profane about profanity?

CHAPTER V

The Profane Twain at Home

After Twain moved back east, his attitude towards profanity sharply changed when he began to court the morally conscientious Olivia. Although he did not stop swearing, when it came to their interactions he immediately took on the role of a penitent sinner and professed to leave such language behind. After their marriage, the Clemens household became one of paradoxes. In the presence of his conscientiously moral wife, Twain tended to avoid using any profanity, and over the course of their marriage, Olivia many times sought to reform the slips of her husband's tongue. Yet while she believed his language was morally unacceptable, in his underlying spirit and in the core of her husband's nature, Olivia found the fundamental essence of a wild, untamed youth, which enticed and delighted her. Ironically, his milder profanity became a source of amusement for Olivia. Later, Twain's three daughters grew to share in this forbidden delight regarding Twain's unconventionally profane language. Over the years, Twain wavered in his use of coarser swearing around his girls and the women in his household; always hearing in the back of his mind the gentle chiding laugh of his wife and young daughters, he was never able to utterly and completely decide for or against the use of such language in feminine settings.

After his time in the West where he gained notoriety for his newspaper pieces and his first nationally lauded short story, "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County," Twain contracted with a local newspaper to fund a trip to Europe and the Holy Land on a retired Civil War vessel named *Quaker City*. In exchange for the newspaper

paying his way, Twain would send back letters and notes to be published. On this trip in 1867, Twain met and soon became fast friends with a younger passenger named Charles Langdon. In his autobiography, Twain recalls that it was aboard this steamer in the stateroom of young Charley that he was first "introduced" to Olivia Langdon in the form of an ivory miniature. He was captivated upon first sight. When Twain singled Olivia out for a special visit in August of 1868, he spent less than two weeks with her before he proposed marriage. Unsurprisingly, Olivia rejected his suit. Determined to persuade her, Twain began a love letter campaign under the guise of letters sent from "a brother to a sister," and in the proceeding 184 letters, Twain began to assume a reformed persona in order to win the hand of the woman he loved.

In these letters, readers see both the private communication of Sam Clemens as well as the written performance of Mark Twain, posturing to convince his lady love of his newly reformed worthiness (Krauth 79). In many ways Twain shrugged off the wildness of his Western years (including his penchant for profanity) and, as Krauth writes, "laid claim to an inherently good character and to a range of proprieties; that is, he announced as his the attributes that manifest themselves in the proper Mark Twain" (79). Susan Harris, in her study *The Courtship of Olivia Langdon and Mark Twain*, explores the conventionality and Victorian morals to which Twain appeals in these letters, reinventing himself in his quest for her hand. Jeffery Steinbrink sums up the situation this way: "Clemens gamely undertook a personal reconstruction that was intended to make him a conventionally 'better' individual—more religious, more regular in his habits, more refined, more comprehensively civilized" (2). This need to reform in order to be fit for

marriage was clear to both Twain and Olivia, and in a letter to Olivia, Twain explicitly writes of the importance of this reformation on their impending nuptials:

> I love—I *worship*—Olivia. L. Langdon, of Elmira—& she loves me. When I am permanently *settled*—& when I have *demonstrated* that I have a good, steady, reliable character, her parents will withdraw their objections, & she *may* marry me—I say she *will*—I intend she *shall.*" (qtd. in Krauth 87)

In order to be worthy of her hand, Twain first had to prove himself a moral man, and as such his wild bachelor behavior and language had to be reined in. Not only did Twain attempt to prove his repentance and newfound morality to Olivia, but he also sought to convince her mother, writing a letter to her in 1869, claiming, "now I never swear; I never taste wine or spirits upon any occasion whatsoever; I am orderly, and my conduct is above reproach in a worldly sense; and finally, I now claim that I am a Christian" (qtd. in Bush 61).

While in the letters Twain very much paints himself as the picture of the penitent sinner who has reformed, he never completely abandoned the language that had become such a part of his character. One particular outburst of profanity occurred while Twain was on one of his lecture tours in January of 1869, and it was so severe that the story of it was publically disseminated in a newspaper article. The Iowa City *Republican*, in its review of Twain's lecture, published the following brief aside recounting the incident:

> But, lest [Twain] might not have succeeded with his "Vandal Abroad," he illustrated the character at the Clinton House, where he stopped. The morning after the lecture nothing was seen of him up to nine

> o'clock, and the landlord, in his kindness, went to his room to see if he might not be in want of something, but received a storm of curses and abuse for disturbing him. Of course the landlord retreated and left him. After a while a terrible racket was heard and unearthly screams, which frightened the women of the house. The landlord rushed to the room and there found a splendid specimen of the vandal and his works. There, before him, was the veritable animal, with his skin on at least, but not much else, and in a towering rage. He had kicked the fastenings from the door, not deigning to open it in the usual way—that would have been too much like other folks. He poured upon the landlord another torrent of curses, impudence and abuse. He demanded to know where the bell-pull was. The landlord told him they were not yet up, as they had not yet got the house fully completed. His kicking the door open and his lung performance were his substitute for a bell. At two o'clock P.M. he had not dressed, and whether he did before he left on the five o'clock train we did not learn. The Y.M.C.A. were wretchedly imposed upon by Mark Twain, and so of course were the audience. He is the only one engaged for the course whose personal character was unknown. (*MTL 3* 48 n. 2)

Clearly his knack for profanity was employed in this vehement outburst, illustrating that his use of profanity did not disappear during his courting stage. However, when Twain writes to Olivia about the incident, such vituperation is bowdlerized from his account, and he instead focuses on his remorse for his behavior. To Olivia, he writes:

> I have just been doing that thing which is sometimes so hard to do—making an apology. Yesterday morning, at the hotel in Iowa City, the landlord called me at 9 o'clock, & it made me so mad I stormed at him with some little violence. I tried for an hour to go to sleep again & couldn't—I wanted that sleep particularly, because I wanted to write a certain thing that would require a clear head & choice language. Finally I thought a cup of coffee might help the matter, & was going to ring for it—no bell. I was mad again. When I did get the landlord up there at last, by slamming the door till I annoyed everybody on my floor, I showed temper again—& he didn't. See the advantage it gave him. His mild replies shamed me into silence, but I was still too obstinate, too proud, to ask his pardon. But last night, in the cars, the more I thought of it the more I repented & the more ashamed I was; & so resolved to make the repentance good by apologizing—which I have done, in the most ample & unmincing form, by letter, this morning. I feel satisfied & jolly, now. (*MTL3* 45)

In Twain's account to Livy, the profanity is entirely absent, and with no great hyperbole his second violent and profane outburst is simply summed as "I was mad again."

Perhaps the best illustration of Twain's willingness to repent of his vices (or at least practice them secretly away from her company) if it pleased his wife can be found in a letter Twain sent Olivia on January 13, 1870. While the primary focus of the letter is on smoking, some mention of profanity is made. More importantly, however, the letter provides insight into Twain's urgent desire to reform in whatever ways possible (especially those that cost him little) in order to conform to Olivia's wishes. He writes:

No, Livy dear, I shall treat smoking just exactly as I would treat the fore-finger of my left hand: If you asked me in all seriousness to cut that finger off, & I saw that you really meant it, & believed that the finger marred my well-being in some mysterious way, & it was plain to me that you could not be entirely satisfied & happy while it remained, I give you my word that I would cut it off. I might think what I pleased about it, & the world might *say* what it pleased—it should come off. There would be nothing foolish in the act—& all wordy *arguments* against it would sink to their proper insignificance in presence of the one *unanswerable* argument that *you desired it* & our married life could not be completely in unison while that bar remained.

Now there are *no* arguments that can convince me that *moderate* smoking is deleterious to me. I cannot attach any weight to either the arguments or the evidence of those who know nothing about the matter personally & so must simply theorize. Theorizing has no effect on me. I have smoked habitually for 26 of my 34 years, & I am the only healthy member our family has. (What do mere theories amount to in the face of a *fact* like that.) My health is wholly faultless—& has been ever since I was 8 years old. My physical structure—lungs, kidneys, heart, brain—is without blemish. The life insurance doctor pronounced me free from all disease & *remarkably* sound. Yet I am the victim of this fearfully destructive habit of smoking. My brother's health has gradually run *down*

instead of *up*—yet he is a model of propriety, & has *no* bad habits. My mother smoked for 30 years, & yet has lived to the age of 67.

Livy dear, make no argument of the fact that you have seen me "nervous, irritable," &c., &c., for it happens to *be* no argument. You can see your father nervous, worn, restless—you can see *any* anti-smoker affected just as you have seen me. It is not a condition confined to smokers—as you possibly know in your own experience.

There *is* no argument that can have even a feather's weight with me against smoking (in my case, at least,) for I *know*, & others merely *suppose*.

But there is one thing that will make me quit smoking, & only one. I will lay down this habit which is so filled with harmless pleasure, just as soon as you write me or say to me that *you desire it*. It shall be a sacrifice—just the same as if I simply asked you to give up going to church, knowing that no *arguments* I offered could convince you that I was right. It will not be hard for me to do it. I stopped chewing tobacco because it was a mean habit, partly, & partly because my mother desired it. I ceased from profanity because Mrs. Fairbanks desired it. I stopped drinking strong liquors because you desired it. I stopped drinking all other liquors because it seemed plain that you desired it. I did what I could to learn to leave my hands out of my pantaloons pockets & quit lolling at full length in easy chairs, because you desired it. There was no sacrifice about any of these things. Discarding these habits curtailed none of my

liberties—on the contrary the doing it released me from various forms of slavery. With smoking it is different. No argument against it is valid—& so to quit it I must do without other reason than that *you* desire it. The desires of others have weight with me, but are not strong *enough* quite.

But even if you never *said* the words, if I saw that my smoking was a bar to our *perfect* wedded unity and happiness, it should go by the board—& pitilessly.

You seem to think it will be a Herculean task for me to suddenly cast out a loved habit of 26 years, Livy dear. Either you do not know me, or I do not know myself. I think differently about it. Speak the words, Livy dear—unaccompanied by any of the hated arguments or theories—& you shall see that I love you well enough to follow your desires, even in this matter. Nothing shall stand in the way of our perfect accord, if I can help it.

If you had ever harried me, or persecuted me about this thing, I could not speak as I do—for persecution only hardens one in evil courses. But it is you, darling, that have suffered the persecution (& yet, being you, it has *seemed* to be me, & so I have resisted all along.) You have had to listen to it all, & it grieves my heart to think of it. It has had its necessary effect in making me more loth to yield up this habit than I would have been otherwise. We do hate to be driven.

Ah, Livy, if the whole matter had been left solely in *your* hands, I would have been quit of the habit of smoking, long ago, & without a pang

> or a struggle. It was bad judgment to attack so strong a vice save through you. There could be little prospect that other means would succeed if your gentle ministrations failed. (*MTL4* 21-23)

Certainly both the length and successive repetition of Twain's offers to swear off smoking illustrate Twain's fervor to appease his Olivia while maintaining the freedom to practice his vices until such freedom was explicitly demanded of him. No doubt Twain's long-reinforced compulsion towards profanity, though not necessarily carrying the same habit-forming properties of nicotine, proved to carry a similarly addictive quality as his smoking did. Yet just as Twain was willing to give up smoking, especially as it was not directly being asked of him, so too was he willing to succumb to the occasional reformation against profanity—so long as such reformation didn't have to be permanent.

Although there was a discrepancy between his actual use of profane language and his professed usage, at least initially Twain maintained a linguistic decorum around Olivia and her family. Her brother, Charles "Charley" Jervis Langdon professed years later that he only ever heard Twain swear once. Of Twain he remarks:

> It has been said that he was given to swearing. I believe he was and that as a young man the habit had quite a hold on him. And yet I can remember hearing him swear only once, and that after I was grown up, which shows how he was careful when the children were about. And what I did hear was entirely different from the heavy, guttural, vulgar thing we call profanity. It was so different I failed to recognize it at first. It came trippingly, almost musically from the tongue. It was artistic compared to the ordinary variety. I can confirm one funny story that has been told

> about it. One day Mrs. Clemens was confined to her bed. She heard her husband in the distance. Something had happened. He was swearing. Soon he arrived at her door and before he had time even to greet her she repeated so as she could remember it all of the language she had just heard. Mr. Clemens looked at her dumbfounded for a moment, then doubled over in mirth: "Livy, Livy," said he, "you have the words but not the tune." (*TIHOT* 133)

As he entered this stage of life, Twain began to discriminate between audiences who would or wouldn't appreciate such language. As Charley notes, Twain tried to be "careful when the children were about."

When they were first married, Twain did his best to maintain his decorum and control his language in the presence of his wife, wanting to hide from her the roughness of his native speech. However, this task proved difficult for one so well-versed in swearing. In his *Autobiography,* Twain recalls his efforts to curb his tongue. He writes:

> All through the first ten years of my married life I kept a constant and discreet watch upon my tongue while in the house, and went outside and to a distance when circumstances were too much for me and I was obliged to seek relief. I prized my wife's respect and approval above all the rest of the human race's respect and approval. I dreaded the day when she should discover that I was but a whited sepulcher partly freighted with suppressed language. I was so careful, during ten years, that I had not a doubt that my suppressions had been successful. Therefore I was quite as happy in my guilt as I could have been if I had been innocent. (*Auto2* 346)

As Twain notes, while he never stopped swearing, he did his best to save his language for company where women were not present, privately taking delight that he was maintaining his ingenuous façade.

Even though Twain tried to keep his profanity from his wife, just the near proximity of their dwelling necessitated his eventual unmasking. Because his morning routine provided countless opportunities for profanity, it was only a matter of time before his wife overheard his language. Katy Leary, a faithful servant in the Clemens household, recalls the following incident when Olivia happened to overhear his language. She recollects:

> There was always fun and excitement, especially when Mr. Clemens was around. He used to go on a rampage about his shirts, though. If he found a shirt in his drawer without a button on, he'd take every single shirt out of that drawer and throw them right out of the window, rain or shine—out of the bathroom window they'd go. I used to look out every morning to see the snowflakes—anything white. Out they'd fly! It was my duty to keep buttons on his shirts, and he'd swear something terrible if I didn't. Oh! He'd swear at anything when he was on a rampage. He'd swear at his razor if it didn't cut right, and Mrs. Clemens used to send me around to the bathroom door sometimes to knock and ask him what was the matter. Well, I'd go and knock; I'd say, "Mrs. Clemens wants to know what's the matter." And then he'd say to me (kind of low) in a whisper like, "Did she hear me Katy?"

> "Yes," I'd say, "every word!" Oh, well, he was ashamed then, he was afraid of getting scolded for swearing like that, because Mrs. Clemens hated swearing. There was two doors into Mrs. Clemens' room, one opened at the head of the bead and one opened so you could go in without seeing the head of the bed. Well, the morning that he swore like that (if she heard him) he would always come in by the door where she couldn't see him—kind of sneak in—and say "Good morning," careless-like, as if he was in a terrible hurry, and then he'd go right out. Oh, he didn't want to see them cold blue eyes she turned on him. That would be all she'd have to do, was look at him once. He said she had a blue eye like steel, you know, that would go right through him.
>
> Well, he'd always try to steal out this back door, after he'd been swearing, and one morning she called him back and said,
>
> "Aren't you going to say good morning, Youth dear?"
>
> "Oh, I forgot," he says, "I forgot, Livy."
>
> "Oh, she said, "you know better than that; you didn't forget." Well, he couldn't say anything, couldn't deny it of course. He kind of laughed it off in his way. (Leary 73-75)

Despite his attempt to shut the door, Twain could not always keep his profanity for Olivia.

Interestingly, Twain's clothes provided him with constant cause for profanity. Frustrated with the trouble of missing buttons, Twain was excited when he received, in his own words, "some new sleeve buttons—from the family—beautiful anticussers. You

can put them in and take them out without a change of temper" (*MFMT* 121). When he decided to adopt the iconic white linen suit year round, Mark Twain called his white outfit his "dontcareadams" since it represented his reckless flouting of social conventions that dictated the propriety of dress (*MFMT* 153).

William Dean Howells, a good friend and trusted literary advisor to Twain, often observed the restraint in Twain's language when Twain was around Olivia. Noting that Twain's ability to withhold such profanity around his wife gradually became more and more taxed as the years passed, Howells explains that Olivia seems to have discerned the ineradicable nature of Twain's profanity and silently excused it. Howells recalls:

> When I first knew him he rarely vented his fury in that sort [with profanity], and I fancy he was under a promise to her which he kept sacred till the wear and tear of his nerves with advancing years disabled him. Then it would be like him to struggle with himself till he could struggle no longer and ask his promise back, and it would be like her to give it back. His profanity was the heritage of his boyhood and young manhood in social conditions and under the duress of exigencies in which everybody swore about as impersonally as he smoked. It is best to recognize the fact of it, and I do so the more readily because I cannot suppose the Recording Angel really minded it more than that Guardian Angel of his. It probably grieved them about equally, but they could equally forgive it. (*TIHOT* 243)

Although she never directly approved of his profanity, it was in Olivia's loving nature to forgive her husband for these linguistic lapses.

Occasionally, Twain would get caught swearing at the most inopportune moments and to the most inappropriate audiences, and he would have to find a way to backpedal and save face. Katy Leary recalls one such occasion. She explains:

> It was shortly after the telephone invention that I went to Hartford. They just put it in about that time and it made Mr. Clemens so mad—"just hear the damned thing ring," he said. Yes, that telephone used to make Mr. Clemens wild, because he would hear allright, but he couldn't give his message out good. It wasn't very good service them days, and he used to fight with the telephone girls all the time. He'd say:
>
> "Why, damn it, are you all asleep down there? If you don't give me better service you can send somebody right up here now and pull this thing out. I won't have this damned thing in the house—it's a nuisance!"
>
> One night Mrs. Taft, the wife of Dr. Taft (lovely people that lived in Hartford), she called him up and George answered the telephone first and then he went and called Mr. Clemens. So Mr. Clemens went out to speak to her but he didn't know who was at the telephone, so he said, "Hello! Hello!" He thought it was one of them hello girls. Mrs. Taft didn't answer him quick enough, so he says, very loud, "What in—— the matter with you down there? Are you all asleep?" And then she said "Hello" and then he said "Hello," and then she says "Hello"—and finally he says, "Dammit, how many times more have I got to say 'Hello'?" Why, he was so mad by then, he didn't even hear Mrs. Taft, and he kept shouting, "If I don't get better service than this I am going to have this pulled right out of

my house, if I don't get any better service from you hello girls down there!"

He was swearing and carrying on something awful, so Mrs. Clemens heard him and opened the dining-room door and put her finger to her lips. Then, of course, he quieted down and poor Mrs. Taft had a chance to be heard at last! So she says very polite:

"Good evening, Mr. Clemens."

"Oh," he says, "is this you, Mrs. Taft? Well," he says, "well, well! I just this minute come to the telephone! *George* has been here trying to talk, and he's been having such a bad time with this old telephone, I had to come and help him and see what I could do!" Think of that! Of course she never let on—but pretended that she believed it.

"Oh, that's too bad, Mr. Clemens," she says. Then she went on with her talk, but she knew all the time it was Mr. Clemens carrying on like that and swearing to "beat the band." Of course he had to get out of it somehow and blamed it on George! But he was always ashamed after talking like that and felt terrible bad. He didn't swear any more after Mrs. Clemens opened the dining-room door and looked at him. He quieted down then, but of course his swearing never seemed really bad to me. It was sort of funny, and a part of him, somehow. Sort of amusing it was—and gay—not like real swearing, 'cause he swore like an angel! (98-100).

Unfortunately for Twain, who loved technological inventions, the telephone proved to be a constant source of trouble when it came to his language around his home. In an interview for the *New York Times*, Twain explains the consternation it caused. He said:

> Of course I know that it is intended to deliver music all over the town through the telephone, but that hardly appeals as much as it might to a man who for years, because of his addiction to strong language, has tried to conceal his telephone number, just like a chauffeur running away after an accident.
>
> When I lived up in Hartford, I was the very first man, in that part of New England at least, to put in a telephone, but it was constantly getting me into trouble because of the things I said carelessly. And the family were all so thoughtless. One day when I was in the garden, fifty feet from the house, somebody on the long distance wire who was publishing a story of mine wanted to get the title.
>
> Well, the title was the first sentence, "Tell him to go to hell." Before my daughter got it through the wire and through him there was a perfect eruption of profanity in that region. All New England seemed to be listening in, and each time my daughter repeated it, she did so with rising emphasis. It was awful. I broke into cold perspiration, and while the neighborhood rang with it, rushed in and implored her to desist. But she would have the last word, and it was "hell," sure enough, every time.
>
> Soon after I moved to New York; perhaps that had something to do with my moving. When I got there and asked for a fire-proof telephone the

> company sent up a man to me. I opened up all my troubles to him, but he laughed and said it was all right in New York. There was a clause in their contract, he said, allowing every subscriber to speak in his native tongue, and of course they would not make an exception against me. That clause has been a godsend in my case. (*Interviews* 573-574)

One can imagine the frazzled Twain shouting profanity into the telephone.

Despite his best efforts to control his profanity around his home, his family was eventually accustomed to his swearing. His oldest daughter, Susy, in her childhood autobiography of her father, recalls that "Papa uses very strong language, but I have an idea not nearly so strong as when he first married mamma" (qtd. in *Auto2* 346). For a while, however, Twain was convinced that he was able to keep such language a secret. Nevertheless, because he could not stop swearing entirely, he could not ever entirely hide such language from those around him. Twain tells the following story in which he recounts the first time his daughters confessed to hearing him cuss. He writes:

> The children were present at breakfast—Clara aged six and Susy eight—and their mother made a guarded remark about strong language; guarded because she did not wish the children to suspect anything—a guarded remark which censured strong language. Both children broke out in one voice with this comment, "Why mamma, papa uses it."
>
> I was astonished. I had supposed that that secret was safe in my own breast, and that its presence had never been suspected. I asked,
>
> "How did you know, you little rascals?"

> "Oh," they said, "we often listen over the ballusters when you are in the hall explaining things to George." (*Auto2* 348)

Thinking his children were out of earshot, Twain happily employed his profanity when speaking to his household servant, George. Little did he know, however, two little girls were delightedly eavesdropping at the top of stairs where his wild swearing casually drifted to their hungry ears.

His second oldest daughter, Clara Clemens, years later wrote about her father's "divine power" and the linguistic outbursts that accompanied his anger. She writes:

> Every member of our family was provided with a healthy temper, but none of us possessed one comparable to the regal proportions of Father's. When his escaped into the open, it was a grand sight. Here was the liberation of the caged wild animals of the earth. It did one good to see it, a raging flood of waters that tore away the puerile dams insulting to freedom. Father's temper shone with the light of his genius. Being angry or irritable in the ordinary way is merely bad management of a good thing, the soul. But the consuming rage of a temper such as Father's has its roots in heaven. When to make use of this divine power so that it shall be creative and not destructive is a great art. I cannot state, however, that Father always stopped to confine his temper to majestic causes. By no means! Frequently a miniature cuff-button could start the conflagration. Again, on occasions when the strong hand of justice was needed, it could be found in the combination of Father's courage and effective temper. (*MFMT* 24)

Interestingly, Twain's anger was something that his family of girls seemed to appreciate and respect—at least according to Twain's own perceptions. Although his profanity was of course viewed as morally inappropriate, they nevertheless at times found delight in the words that accompanied the temper that "shone with the light of his genius." It was not until much later in life that Twain learned the girl's real reaction to these outbursts.

His young family enjoyed the physical humor in the transformation of their father's demeanor so much that they developed an endearment to describe Twain in these moments. Clara explains:

> We used to call Father the "spitting gray kitten" because in many of his spurts of irritation he kept a soft, fuzzy quality in his demeanor that reminded us of a little kitten with its fur all ruffled. We enjoyed this spectacle, and were inclined to inspire it whenever we could. When his performance was ended, we would exclaim "Oh, you bad, spitting gray kitten!" and he would laugh a gay little laugh and shake his leonine head of gray curls. He showed love differently from other people because he was a bit afraid of it. (*MFMT* 84-85)

Wonderfully visual, Clara's description of Twain as a cat with its fluffy ruffled fur undercuts the seriousness of Twain's outbursts. Nevertheless, one should not assume that Twain's language was entirely without a biting edge. Elaborating upon the "style of the kitten-spitting as it appeared on paper now and then," Clara directs readers to the following letter Twain wrote about a misdelivered toy (*MFMT* 85). Twain writes:

> Livy darling, that express-package you write me about is a cussed game of some kind which G.L.P. wants Webster and Co. to publish; and, of course

> (being an author, that is to say a jackass) he bundles it off to Elmira instead of first inquiring if that is the right place to send it to. An author always jumps to conclusions, always acts upon suppositions; never knows ANY-thing, and doesn't want to; he'd just as soon suppose, and rather; I never saw an author who was aware that there is any dimensional difference between a fact and a surmise. They ought all to be damned. And when you get along down to people who are not authors at all but only half-breeds, like L., it is thoroughly offensive to have them sporting the symbolical assness of the fullbloods, this way. Next, he will be crying for his Toy—it's the only one he's got; it's his patent office model; that's the reason he takes so much author-like pains to send it to the wrong place; and dern him he never shall have it again, for I will burn it when I get there. When one's character begins to fall under suspicion and disfavor, how swift, then, is the work of disintegration and destruction. Until this hour I have never heard a whisper against L., of any sort; and yet now I am perfectly satisfied that he opened the Johnstown dam, as I am of anything in the world. I love you. (qtd. in *MFMT* 85-86)

While one can certainly imagine the angry kitten pacing about and ruffling its fur over the "cussed game" and damned authors, one also notices that this language is not entirely as innocuous as Clara and the other girls in the Clemens household find it to be. However, on the whole, this sort of swearing was filled with more bluster than true damnation. As Clara notes, Twain's "bark was far worse than his bite except in important

matters, and the bark was accompanied by a cunning twinkle in his brilliant eyes" (*MFMT* 86).

Because of Twain's particular style of profanity, many times his daughters did not even recognize the true nature of their father's words. Katy Leary recalls the following episode in which Jean, Twain's youngest daughter, is told for the first time what her father's "spitting kitten" language really is. Leary recollects:

> No, his swearing never seemed like other people's swearing, and that makes me think of a funny story about Jean and her father when Jean was a little girl. It seems Mr. Clemens was terrible mad one day; some man had done something very mean and he was cussing very fierce and giving this man "down the banks." Mr. Clemens had little Jean by the hand, and he was walking back and forth in the living-room, just swearing all to himself as hard as he could. Jean had her little hand in his, trying to keep step with him, and looking up at him and hearing them words she'd never heard before, as she was trotting along beside him. She didn't know they was oaths, you know, didn't know what kind of language he was using, of course.
>
> Well, soon after this I was out walking with her one day when a terrible rough-looking man come along, right in front of us, and he was swearing "to beat the band," and she says: "Oh, Katy! Did you hear that man?"
>
> I said: "Oh, yes! I heard him."
>
> "Oh," she says, "he's using awful language. He's swearing!"

> "How do you *know* he's swearing?" I says.
>
> "Oh, I know he is," says Jean, "and swearing terrible!"
>
> "Well," says I, "sometimes your father swears a little mite!"
>
> "Oh, no, Katy!" says Jean. "No, no. Papa never swears."
>
> "Why, yes," I says, "he did some swearing last Sunday in the living-room when you was walking back and forth with him."
>
> But Jean says, very cross: "Oh, no Katy! No! You're mistaken. That wasn't swearing. That was only one of papa's jokes!" (Leary 235-237)

Although little Jean had heard the same obscene words rolling out from her father's mouth as she did when she met the man in the street, the difference between the sound and spirit of the two invocations seemed fundamental. The man cursing in the street had within him the ugly spirit of malevolence while within her father a very different spirit resided.

For many people close to him, there was something in the rhythms of Twain's profanity and perhaps the accompanying facial expressions that were irresistibly entertaining. His sudden shifts from contentment to profanity surprised and captivated those around him. Clara recalls how her "Aunt Sue," a religious reformist who was generally morally conservative, also found amusement in Twain's swearing. Clara writes:

> Aunt Sue adored Father's little bursts of temper and would laugh at him most heartily. Often he laughed with her, altering his vehement mood instantaneously to one of childlike mirth. These sudden changes from

> shadow to light, and from light to shadow, were perhaps one of Father's real charms, for the human race likes surprises. (*MFMT* 60)

In addition to the beauty of his assemblage of profanity and indictments, the shift itself to sudden anger provided amusement in its unexpectedness.

Although Twain's girls were amused by their father's language, they often took it upon themselves to reform him in their mother's absence, lovingly and lightheartedly reprimanding him for his careless tongue. Frank Marshal White recalls a carriage ride around London on the morning of the "rehearsal" for the Queen of England's Jubilee Procession where such a chiding took place. White remembers:

> I called at the Clemens residence at half-past three o'clock (the hour of sunrise in England in June) on the morning of the 19th, and the four of us drove up and down between Buckingham Palace and the Tower for two or three hours, but no sign of a processional rehearsal could we discover. Many picturesque and complicated aspersions did the humorist cast upon the character of his informant as to the potential occurrence of the morn. Playfully chided by his offspring as to the futility of losing his temper, which he really had not lost at all, he drawled pensively: "I don't know about that. Sometimes when a man is in a thoroughgoing temper he finds things to say that are worth preserving." (*TIHOT* 217)

Whereas Twain often acquiesced to the petting reproach of his wife and daughters, he nevertheless maintained that profanity had its value in both its expression of emotion and the art of its construction.

Once Twain's daughters grew older, their father's profanity, while still discouraged by their mother, became a sort of inside joke, and they bonded over the forbidden language. One such example can be found in a letter Mark Twain sent to Clara. Writing about his time in Sanna, the Swedish village where Jean was treated for epilepsy at Dr. Kellgren's sanatorium, Twain describes his own experience in explicit language. To his "Spider," one of his nicknames for Clara, Twain writes:

> Hell, July / 99
>
> Dear Spider:
>
> This is the daily Itinerary:
>
> 8 to 10 a.m. Inferior London coffee for the damned.
>
> 10 to 12 a.m "Treatment" for the damned.
>
> 12 to 2 Pant and gasp and fight the flies.
>
> 2 Dinner for the damned.
>
> 3 till 8 p.m. Pant and gasp and fight the flies.
>
> 8 Supper and flies for the damned.
>
> 9 till 11 Flies, fans, and profanity.
>
> 11 p.m. Bed. Tallow candles. Flies No night—dim, pale-blue daylight all night (Lat. 58 N.) Cool, and might be pleasant, but the flies stand watch and persecute the damned all night. No nettings for protection.
>
> Rooms the size of a tiger's cage.
>
> Not a bath-room in the whole settlement.
>
> A great lake, but not nearby.

> Open fields all around the damned—no woods.
>
> Row boats on the simmering puddle—none on the lake.
>
> Make peace with Satan, and come along. Leave your clothes behind. Fly paper is all you need.
>
> Exhausted. With a power of love.
>
> FATHER (qtd. in *MYMT* 214-215)

Writing to Clara from "Hell," Twain doubtlessly entertains her with his shockingly pervasive profanity, and Clara no doubt found her father's candid and graphic narration much more honest and representative of her father than any euphemistic or patronizingly positive description of the place could ever be.

While his daughters cheerfully chided their father for his language, they typically enjoyed the special treat of hearing his melodic swearing. And though Twain often sought to suppress his volcanic profanity in their presence, occasionally he purposefully let slip a small delight that sent his girls into giggling ecstasy. Isabel Lyon, Twain's personal secretary, recorded one such amusing incident when Twain was playing cards with his youngest daughter, Jean, and let his tongue loose. Lyon writes:

> When Jean is in Mr. Clemens's room and we play cards—or don't—he gives a freer vent to … his words and is therefore a dear delight. Tonight he had nothing but little "spot" Cards. & he called them a "perfect puke of spot Cards." Ah, his babbling is of a Strength—Jean remonstrated—and in a chuckle of joy he told about a man—a good man—who many years ago was stranded somewhere in Mexico … without a cent. He hunted everywhere for work, and finally they offered him a chance to personate

> Christ in … one of the religious processions … depicting Christ on his way to Calvary. The street was lined with godless folk who pelted him with rotten eggs—bad bananas, and hideous other things. The man stood it with great dignity until the storm was too hot then putting down his cross he said "If I wasn't personating God Almighty, Id show yer a Thing or Two." I think it was apropos of the fact that a "perfect puke of spot cards" was nothing to what Mr. Clemens could say if he were not upholding his dignity as Jean's Father. (qtd. in Trombley 46)

Although Twain could have certainly let completely loose, he chose to let slip only a few small crude expressions to the amusement of young Jean, reserving instead his full force for more acceptable company.

Bonding with his daughters over such language, Mark Twain found great amusement in pretending that the profane language passed not through his lips, but rather through the innocent lips of his daughters. Delighted by this wicked supposition, his girls shared his amusement and went along with their father's joke. For instance, when there had been much confusion about securing a villa in Florence, Twain wrote the following letter to his daughter Jean and placed a bit of profanity in Clara's mouth. Twain writes:

> I have just received your letter, dear Jean, and am very sorry for that stupid and entirely inexcusable botch which Mr. X has made in the Papiniano matter. Clara broke it to me yesterday and I won't deny that it did certainly add a ton or two to the load which Bliss is furnishing me to carry. I proposed to send a cable saying: "Take your Papiniano and go to hell with it." But Clara and I could not agree. She wanted me to insert

> "damn" in front of Papiniano, but I felt your mother would not approve of that; and so we split that trifle and sent no cable at all. Explain to your mother, so that she will see that although Clara tried to get me to do wrong, I stood out and done right. (qtd. in *MFMT* 240)

Not only does Twain jokingly accuse Clara of wanting to send a bit of swearing in the cable, but he also pretends that she is one who is trying to corrupt his innocent tongue with profane language, a laughably implausible role reversal.

The profanity of others in his household also amused Twain, much to the consternation of Olivia. For example, their young German nursemaid was particularly fond of sprinkling in swear words in her daily conversations, and Twain and his youngest daughter, Jean, naturally enjoyed adding these phrases to their vocabulary. In Susy's biography of her father, she recounts the influence of the German maid:

> Papa and I had a nice long time to discuss and laugh over German profanity. One of the German phrases papa particularly enjoys is "O heilige maria Mutter Jesus!" Jean has a German nurse, and this was one of her phrases, there was a time when Jean exclaimed "Ach Gott!" to every trifle, but when mamma found it out she was shocked and instantly put a stop to it. (qtd. in *Auto2* 394)

Of Susy's entry, Twain himself recalls:

> It brings that pretty little German girl vividly before me—a sweet and innocent and plump little creature with peachy cheeks; a clear-souled little maiden and without offence, notwithstanding her profanities, and she was loaded to the eyebrows with them. She was a mere child. She was not

> fifteen yet. She was just from Germany, and knew no English. She was always scattering her profanities around, and they were such a satisfaction to me that I never dreamed of such a thing as modifying her. For my own sake, I had no disposition to tell on her. Indeed I took pains to keep her from being found out. I told her to confine her religious exercises to the children's quarters, and urged her to remember that Mrs. Clemens was prejudiced against pieties on week days. To the children, the little maid's profanities sounded natural and proper and right, because they had been used to that kind of talk in Germany, and they attached no evil importance to it. It grieves me that I have forgotten those vigorous remarks. I long hoarded them in my memory as a treasure. But I remember one of them still, because I heard it so many times. The trial of that little creature's life was the children's hair. She would tug and strain with her comb, accompanying her work with her misplaced pieties. And when finally she was through with her triple job she always fired up and exploded her thanks toward the sky, where they belonged, in this form: "Gott sei Dank ich bin schon fertig mit'm Gott verdammtes Haar!" (I believe I am not quite brave enough to translate it.) (*Auto2* 394)

Finding a kindred spirit in the young nurse, Twain tried to shelter her from the reforming touch of his wife, reminding her not to use such strong profanity around Olivia. Indeed, he treasured her little profane utterances, and no doubt enjoyed having another being in his house who appreciated the usefulness of swearing.

Twain frequently found amusement in the supposition that the innocent angels in his house could be guilty of wild, profane language, and he often liked to joke about the "profanity" of his wife and daughters. James Montgomery Flagg, an artist who was hired to paint a portrait of Twain, recalls one visit where Twain laughed about his wife's cussing. Flagg explains:

> Willie had to do some tall talking to get Twain to pose for a portrait, but in spite of the old gent's saying he would "rather have smallpox than sit for his picture" he finally consented. So I spent several Sunday mornings with Twain painting and listening. He told me stories in his drawl and I got laughing so I couldn't paint. We were in his room at the back of the old house on West 10th Street, which was connected with the front room by a long passage. He could tip his chair back and see Mrs. Clemens sewing in her room in the front. He had been cussing softly, then he said to me:
>
> "My wife cusses too, not the same words. *She* says 'Sugar!' and the Recording Angel will give her just as blacks as he does me!" (*TIHOT* 241)

Twain found in Olivia's "Sugar!" the same spirit of wrath that characterized his own "Damn!"; and he felt justified in joking that her cussing was as bad as his, for while the words certainly weren't the same, the spirit behind them was.

Despite her censure of her husband and her frequent requests for him to reform his tongue, Olivia also enjoyed her husband's youthful blasphemy even though she held

to the conviction that such language was improper. Amused with Twain's language herself, Leary noticed Olivia's subtle enjoyment over Twain's language. She recalls:

> But of course, Mr. Clemens' swearing really warn't like most people's cussing—it wasn't what you'd call *profane*. I heard somebody say once that his swear words just rolled off him like perspiration—it was part of the *way* he talked. Nobody that had any sense could take offense at it. I always liked to hear it myself, really, 'twas sort of lively and picturesque—and even Mrs. Clemens, although she didn't approve of it, really didn't mind it so much, way down in her heart, I know. (236)

When Olivia witnessed her husband's swearing, she often exhibited a sort of simultaneous amusement and shock. In the following account, Clara remembers one such instance. She writes:

> Once, in the middle of a careful description of a very devout clergyman that Mother was reading aloud, Father sprang to his feet and danced a kind of hornpipe while he said, "By the humping, jumping Jesus, what the hell is that to you?"
>
> Never shall I forget the strange sound that burst forth from my mother's lips. It could hardly be called a laugh and yet it certainly was not a sob. It contained mirth and horror, so Father was triumphant. But I noticed that the next time he repeated this gem from the literature of the song, the words had been altered to "By the humping, jumping Jackson, what the yell is that to you?" (*MFMT* 26)

Both appalled and amused, Olivia's reaction was just what Twain was looking for, and on the one hand he was delighted and triumphant about her response. However, Clara notes that when her father later repeated the offending "gem," he had significantly lessened the profanity it contained, removing both the name of the Lord as well as less offensive "hell"—both omissions signs of Livy's reforming touch.

Over their years of marriage, Olivia's quest to improve Twain's language was simultaneously authentic and unrealistic, and in some ways it became a running joke between the two. For example, thirteen years after they were married, Mark Twain wrote Olivia a letter, adding a bit of humor at the end by referring to his reformed tongue. He writes:

> I offer you as a birthday present, the fact that only three profane expressions have issued from my lips or *existed in my heart* (which is the *great* thing) since the event of the 8th of last August. Of course I mean in waking hours: (curiously enough, or *not* curiously, I don't know which) there is no change in my dreams: in my dreams I still do swear like the very army in Flanders. (qtd. in *MFMT* 75)

While perhaps he really was able to resist swearing within this time period, Twain jokingly notes that profanity pervades his subconscious mind. He seems to suggest that although he may superficially curb his swearing for a while, in the core depths of his being, the disposition towards strong language is part of his psychological composition.

This pattern of reforming his language and then regressing to his old ways characterized much of Twain's marriage. In his notebook, Twain jotted down one such incident that occurred while he was on a sea voyage. He writes:

> Swore off from profanity early this morning. I was on deck in the peaceful dawn, the calm and holy dawn. Went down dressed, bathed, put on white linen, shaved—a long, hot, troublesome job, and no profanity. Then started to breakfast. Remembered my tonic—first time in three months without being told—poured it in a measuring-glass, held the bottle in one hand, it in the other, the cork in my teeth—reached up and got a tumbler—measuring-glass sprang out of my fingers—got it, poured another dose, first setting tumbler on washstand—just got it poured, ship lurched, heard a crash behind me—it was the tumbler, broken into millions of fragments, but the bottom hunk whole—picked it up to throw it out of the open port, threw out the measuring-glass instead—then I released my voice. Mrs. C. behind me in the door: "Don't reform any more, it isn't any improvement." (*EMT* 518)

Despite his best efforts, the frustration and anger was more than he could stand, and as in many similar situations, Twain inevitably reverted to his former language.

While Twain was never able to entirely abandon his profanity, Livy did help him learn to keep his anger from inspiring rash actions. Clara recalls that

> it was largely [Olivia's] idea that, when he was in a towering rage over some misdemeanor committed by a man residing in some distant town, he should express all his condemning thoughts in a letter—but not mail the letter. Father was so pleased with this scheme that he used it frequently. He did not like to entirely lose the satisfaction of expressing his feelings when they were so violent, but he realized that time often cooled them

> down so much that later on he had to admit they had not been well measured to the size of the cause. (*MFMT* 68)

This technique of venting his feelings but not necessarily sharing that venting with the object of his ire proved helpful not only with letter writing, but also in everyday interactions. Clara explains that Twain "would try to get ahead of his temper in a similar way when in conversation with some 'blatherskite.' Away he would walk quite suddenly, and on reaching his bedroom pour out streams of hot words into the silent walls" (*MFMT* 70). In this way, Olivia's reforming touch proved extremely useful.

After the tragic death of Olivia, Twain carried along with her memory the reminders not to swear at all (when possible) or at least not in certain companies (as most often proved the case). Trying his best to honor his wife's wishes, Twain abstained from profanity for nearly a full year after her passing. However, his nature soon got the best of him, and Leary tells of his eventual slip. She writes:

> We moved up there that summer, but it didn't turn out very good, after all. He really didn't like it; it was too lonesome for him. That was where he done the first swearing he'd done since Mrs. Clemens died! And I couldn't blame him much, 'cause I was so darned lonesome myself! I didn't know what to do with myself, neither.
>
> I'll tell you about this time he swore so, 'cause you couldn't help laughing, although it was very sad, too.
>
> You see, Mr. Clemens had promised one time that he wasn't going to swear anymore! And I was so surprised, I says, "Really, Mr. Clemens?"

"No," he says, "never again—that is unless something perfectly *awful* happens, that I just can't get along without swearing!"

"Well," I said, "that's a good idea, and now we'll see how long you keep to it," I says.

Well, after we come from Florence, for over a year he never used one cuss word until we struck Dublin. One day I was sittin' in my room—which was down the hall from his room where he wrote, when I hear—

"Well! Damn this house! Damned old place! Damned old climate! Damnedest room! Not a damn thing here that anybody wants! Can't even find a pin in the whole place!"

He was walking up and down, swearing to "beat the band!" He was looking for pins, you see, to pin his manuscripts; and he walked right down the hall, talking all the time, saying: "You can never find a thing in this damned old place! Why, I had a new paper of pins only yesterday, and now some old idiot has come and took all my pins away!"

Of course, I was settin' right there with the door open and heard every word, and I was really enjoying myself, I can tell you, 'cause I hated the place as much as he did.

Well, he come down the hall, and when he seen me settin' there, he was kind of startled and he looked a little sheepish. "Why, Katy!" he says. "Are you here?"

"Yes," I says, "I've been here all the time."

"Oh," he says, "I didn't know you was anywheres around."

"No, I know you didn't," I says, "because you've been swearing to 'beat the band.' I heard every word you said."

"Well," he says, "I have been swearing. There's no mistake about that, but this is the first time I swore since I left Florence."

"Yes, Mr. Clemens," I says, "I know it; but honest, to tell the truth, I was kind of amused," says I, "listenin' to you. I didn't mind it a bit. Bad language is the only thing can take the deadness off this place," I says. "It's awful! It would make anybody swear!"

"Would it make you, Katy?" said Mr. Clemens.

"Yes," I said, "it would, so I don't mind how much you swear. It's all right! Go ahead!"

He was kind of relieved, I guess, to know that I felt just as he did. He used to say he could turn the air black and blue and thick with cuss words when he started out! Bute he certainly was startled that day he seen me settin' there while he was doing all that cussing. He said it made him feel pretty bad and guilty. (Leary 250-252)

Even after Olivia's death, Twain held her views of profanity close to his heart. While he still regularly enjoyed such language, in the presence of the women in his household, his profanity never provided him with the same mirth as it did when his young daughters sat around his knees, laughing innocently at his inappropriate language, and the love of his life, Olivia, shook her head and, smiling, exclaimed in both shock and delight, "Youth!"

CHAPTER VI

The Profane Twain in the Masculine World

In the presence of women, profanity was considered uncouth; however, with a masculine audience, such swearing could be freely enjoyed and revered. As Gregg Camfield explains, "given the culture's sexual double standard that held men to be worldly, capable use of profanity was often considered a sign of manliness and rhetorical prowess. Across the social class spectrum, breaches of taste, especially the most serious breach—profanity—were allowed in masculine company" (449). When it came to masculine profanity, Twain consistently associated it with the captains and crews of river and ocean vessels, and the prototypical profane man in Twain's mind was Captain Edgar "Ned" Wakeman, whom Twain met during a voyage from San Francisco to Nicaragua in 1866. As Twain explains in an opening note to "Captain Stormfield's Visit to Heaven," Wakeman "was deeply religious, by nature and by the training of his mother, and a fluent and desolating swearer by the training of his father and by the necessities of his occupation" (139). Twain later noted that, "in the matter of a wide and catholic profanity he had not a peer on the planet while he lived. It was a deep pleasure to me to hear him do his stunts in this line" (*Eruption* 245). From the time of their meeting, Twain argued for the necessity of profane language. He once wrote that "profanity is more necessary to me than is immunity from colds" (*MTPLetters* 14 May 1877).[1] Certain topics and situations, he believed, could not be properly addressed without a bit of swearing, and men were the most appreciative audience.

Needing a distinctly masculine space, Twain deemed the billiards room to be men's quarters, and as such, within it he was free to use whatever language he liked—visitors were warned to enter upon their own risk. Profanity constantly pervaded the billiards room, and Twain once remarked that one of his main companion's performance in billiards was dramatically improved with the man's increasing use of profanity (qtd. in Trombley 130). Of the masculine domain of the billiards room, Clara explains:

> It was in this room that he spent most of the day at his desk or, betweentimes, knocking billiard-balls about. It was on the third floor where, as he once explained to a caller, he "could do all the swearing he wanted to when the butler brought in visiting-cards on a tray, as if he were serving the eucharist." This unexpected speech to the caller seemed, however, to have no depressing effect on the atmosphere. Instead, everyone laughed and mother expostulated, "Youth!" (*MFMT* 27)

When it came to these callers, Twain only had so much patience. Clara recalls that "Although mother never seemed to lose patience, Father could only stand a certain amount of whining, and then suddenly delivered a healthy mental slap that greatly amazed the woebegoner" (*MFMT* 33). Not only would Twain freely curse the arrival of such visitors and damn them for interrupting his game, but he wouldn't resist letting fly a "healthy mental slap" if they ventured into his lair and bothered him with their petty wants. Twain was serious about his billiards!

Competitive by nature, Twain was intense when it came to his recreation, especially billiards. Albert Bigelow Paine, who stayed at the Clemens residence for a

time, recounts the following episode of "Cowboy" in which Twain proved especially profane. He writes:

> After dinner we played again—until midnight. The game was "Cowboy," in which both pockets and caroms count. I had ... luck ... and at one point made a carom, followed by most of the balls falling into the pockets.
>
> "Well," he said, "when you pick up that cue this dam' table drips at every pore." (*TIHOT* 270)

Paine continues:

> He was not an even tempered player. When his game was going badly his language sometimes became violent, and he was likely to be critical of his opponent. Then reaction would set in, and remorse. He would become gentle and kindly, hurrying the length of the table to set up the balls as I knocked them into the pockets, as if to show in every way except by actual confession in words that he was sorry for what no doubt seemed to him an unworthy display of temper.
>
> Once, when luck seemed to have quite deserted him and he was unable to make any of his favorite shots, the air became fairly charged, the lightning fierce and picturesque. Finally with a regular thunderblast he seized the cue with both hands and literally mowed the balls across the table, landing some of them on the floor. I do not recall his remarks during that performance—I was chiefly concerned in getting out of the way. Then I gathered up the balls and we went on playing as if nothing had happened,

> only he was very gentle and sweet, like a sunny meadow after a storm has passed by. After a little he said:
>
> "This is a most amusing game. When you play—badly, it—amuses *me*. And when I play badly, and lose my temper, it certainly *must*—amuse—*you*." (*TIHOT* 271)

Twain's violent use of swear words while playing was well-known among his companions.

Twain's secretary, Isabel Lyon, recalls another instance where billiards and alcohol led to foul language. Staying up till nearly eleven o'clock, Lyon watched Paine and Twain play billiards for hours before she retired to bed. Waking to the sound of clacking balls at two thirty in the morning, she stumbled into the billiard room to find the two men still feverishly playing. She writes that she discovered Twain,

> Playing in a drunken haze…& couldn't move without reeling. It was a great thing to see—P—was furious with me & told me to clear out but I sat down & said I'd stay until the King [her nickname for Twain] started for bed. P didn't like me—but I didn't care. It was wonderful to see the King pick up a ball & fondle it—& then try to hit it with his cue & be unable to touch it; but he swore splendidly. AB left the room & I gently took…the King's cue away, & led him to his room. He staggered & hit his head against one of the little angels on his bed post. & grabbed his dear head with a volley of oaths. Then I left the room but waited to hear his shoes drop. (qtd. in Trombley 183)

Even those who were less intimate with Twain enjoyed the marvel of the free language that accompanied his billiards games. A dean at the University of Chicago, Elizabeth Wallace made Twain's acquaintance during their overlapping stays in Bermuda in 1908. Nearly a year after their first meeting, Wallace visited Twain at Stormfield and wrote of her experiences in his billiards room. She recalls:

> It was sometimes a wonderful and fearsome thing to watch Mr. Clemens play billiards. He loved the game, and he loved to win, but he occasionally made a very bad stroke, and then the varied, picturesque, and unorthodox vocabulary, acquired in his more youthful years, was the only thing that gave him comfort. Gently, slowly, with no profane inflexions of voice, but irresistibly as though they had the head-waters of the Mississippi for their source, came this stream of unholy adjectives and choice expletives. I don't mean to imply that he indulged himself thus before promiscuous audiences. It was only when some member of the inner circle of his friends was present that he showed him this mark of confidence, for he meant it in the nature of a compliment. His mind was as far from giving offense as the mind of a child, and we felt none. We only felt a kind of awe. At no other time did I ever hear Mr. Clemens use any word which could be called profanity. But if we would penetrate into the billiard-room and watch him play, we must accept certain inevitable privileges of royalty. (Wallace 118-119)

Free from the rigorous standards of respectability that suppressed his language when he was in the sphere of feminine influence, Twain found in his billiards room an atmosphere

perfectly suited to the coarseness of his speech. If a woman such as Elizabeth Wallace ventured into his masculine sanctuary, then it was her fault, not his, if she took offense at his profanity; she and Twain clearly recognized this fact.

When it comes to the swearing Twain indulged in when in the company of men, William H. Rideing provides readers with the most insightful description of the breadth and timbre of these eruptions. In lieu of any uncensored records of Twain's language, Rideing's explanation provides readers with perhaps the best visual metaphors for Twain's profanity. Rideing writes:

> How mistaken were the people who not knowing him imagined that everywhere and on all occasions his attitude and point of view were those of the jester! I never knew a more earnest man than he was, or one whose aroused indignation was so overwhelming. When anger moved him you could see his lean figure contract and his eyes ominously screw themselves into their sockets. Every fiber in him quivered, and for the moment his voice became acid and sibilant and out of tune—almost a whine. Then he would let himself out in a break, like that dam unable to hold the flood, in language as candid and unshrinking as the vernacular of the Elizabethans. Epithet would be piled on epithet, one following another with cumulative vigor, distinctness and the disclosing and illuminative effect of explosives. And not a word missed its mark, not a word seemed superfluous or exchangeable for any other word; each fitted the use he made of it as a cartridge fits a rifle or revolver .... He has always conveyed to me the sense of music, not lively *con vivace*, but the slower

> movements like the *andante* of a symphony. There were exquisite cadences in his voice, and his gestures harmonized with them. He did not sparkle as Aldrich sparkled; he glowed. Have you seen Vesuvius when quiescent, throbbing in the dark, its ruddy fire diminishing one moment and the next burning scarlet like the end of a gargantuan cigar? In that one could find by a stretch of fancy a resemblance to his passages from coolness to heat. He was more like a frigate than a torpedo boat, and he deliberated before he touched his guns. (*TIHOT* 185-187)

The details of this description are commonly echoed by those who interacted with Twain on a daily basis and were familiar with the qualities of his swearing. Friends and business acquaintances alike noted the sudden shift when he was angered, the musical qualities of his profane words, and the drawling, scalding profanity that oozed out of him.

For instance, Dan Beard, the illustrator for several of Twain's novels including *A Connecticut Yankee In King Author's Court*, recalls a conversation he had with Twain in which Twain's profanity was perfectly married to the slow puffs of cigar smoke rolling out of his mouth. Beard writes:

> [Twain] did not rise but turned his head slowly toward me, drawling, "Sit down. In regard to the illustrations you are to make," he said, "I only want to say this. If a man comes to me and wants me to write a story, I will write one for him; but if he comes to me and wants me to write a story and then tells me what to write, I say, 'Damn you, go hire a typewriter,'" meaning a stenographer. In saying this he did not blow smoke from his mouth, but it seemed to roll out slowly like round, bulbous

> clouds, in perfect rhythm with the words, with which the smoke was so intimately connected that I remember it as if what he said were vocalized cumulus clouds of tobacco smoke. If the building had been burning down it would not have hurried him a bit. He would have leisurely arose and, while complaining of the interruption, just as leisurely found his way downstairs. (*TIHOT* 164)

Obviously, the clouds of tobacco smoke melded perfectly with Twain's sulphorous fire-and-brimstone breath.

Within the context of business and the world of men in general, Twain believed that profanity ought not to be considered immoral behavior for a gentleman. In a speech given on the twenty-fifth anniversary of Tuskegee University in January of 1906, Twain discussed "Taxes and Morals" and addressed the question of whether or not a gentleman may swear. Twain said:

> At Tuskegee they will jump to misleading conclusions from insufficient evidence, along with Dr. Parkhurst, and they will deceive the student with the superstition that no gentleman ever swears. Look at those good millionaires; aren't they gentlemen? Well, they swear. Only once a year, maybe, but there's enough bulk to it to make up for the lost time. And do they lose anything by it? No, they don't; they save enough in three minutes to support the family seven years. When they swear do we shudder? No—unless they say damn. Then we do. It shrivels us all up. Yet we ought not to feel so about it, because we all swear—everybody. Including the ladies. Including Dr. Parkhurst, that strong and brave and

excellent citizen, but superficially educated. For it is not the word that is the sin, it is the spirit back of the word. When an irritated lady says "Oh!" the spirit back of it is "damn," and that is the way it is going to be recorded against her. It always makes me so sorry when I hear a lady swear like that. But if she says "damn," and says it in an amiable, nice way, it isn't going to be recorded at all.

The idea that no gentleman ever swears is all wrong; he can swear and still be a gentleman if he does it in a nice and benevolent and affectionate way. The historian John Fiske, whom I knew well and loved, was a spotless and most noble and upright Christian gentleman, and yet he swore once. Not exactly that, maybe; still he—but I will tell you about it.

One day when he was deeply immersed in his work his wife came in much moved and profoundly distressed, and said, "I am sorry to disturb you, John, but I must, for this is a serious matter, and needs to be attended to at once." Then, lamenting, she brought a grave accusation against their little son. She said: "He has been saying his Aunt Mary is a fool and his Aunt Martha is a damned fool." Mr. Fiske reflected upon the matter a minute, then said: "Oh, well, it's about the distinction I should make between them myself."

Mr. Washington, I beg you to convey these teachings to your great and prosperous and most beneficent educational institution, and add them to the prodigal mental and moral riches wherewith you equip your fortunate protégés for the struggle of life. (*Speaking* 480-481)

Jokes about the propriety of swearing in situations involving gender, in other words, could be a source of humor even in a formal address.

According to Twain, there were some topics such as taxes that demanded the use of profanity for a full discussion. When he took over as editor of the *Buffalo Express*, in his "Salutatory" editorial published on August 21, 1869, Twain wrote:

> I shall not make use of slang or vulgarity upon any occasion or under any circumstances, and shall never use profanity except in discussing house-rent and taxes. Indeed, upon second thought, I will not even use it then, for it is unchristian, inelegant, and degrading—though to be speak truly I do not see how house-rent and taxes are going to be discussed worth a cent without it. (*BE* 5)

Here Twain jokes both about not using swear words in his articles (which he did nonetheless) and about the necessity of such language for certain topics (which he heartily believed in).

Like taxes, the frustration of paying bills was also a cause for profanity. In a poem mimicking the famous poem "Those Evening Bells" by Thomas Moore, Twain expresses the irritation that causes him to damn the bills in his poem "Those Annual Bills." He writes:

> These annual bills! these annual bills!
> How many a song their discord trills
> Of "truck" consumed, enjoyed, forgot,
> Since I was skinned by last year's lot.

Those joyous beans are passed away;

Those onions blithe, O where are they!

Once loved, lost, mourned—*now* vexing ILLS

Your shades troop back in annual bills!

And so 'twill be when I'm aground—

These yearly duns will still go round,

While other bards, with frantic quills,

Shall damn and *damn* these annual bills! (*Sketches* 68-69)

Interestingly, in Twain's version of Moore's poem, the final line, rather than singing the praises of the sweetness of the bells, sings instead the damnation of those never-ending annual bills.

Sometimes for Twain, profanity was necessary simply for its ability to give vent to suppressed emotions. As Hulbert explains, "it is clear to a student of human nature that any normal human being must have a reasonable stock of expletives for use in the excitements of sport or pain or other exigency of life" (73). When Twain travelled to the Hawaiian islands, his chief complaint about the native language he encountered was its inability to express emotions due to its lack of swear words. Twain writes:

> The native language is soft and liquid and flexible, and in every way efficient and satisfactory—till you get mad; then there you are; there isn't anything in it to swear with. Good judges all say it is the best Sunday language there is. But then all the other six days in the week it just hangs idle on your hands; it isn't any good for business and you can't work a

> telephone with it. Many a time the attention of the missionaries has been called to this defect, and they are always promising they are going to fix it; but no, they go fooling along and fooling along nothing is done. (*EMT* 308-309)

Likewise, the German language also suffered from a similar weakness. In *A Tramp Abroad*, Twain noted that German words didn't always have the requisite energy and impressive sound for swearing that English words did, and as a result when one was being cursed at in German, because of the sound of the words one wasn't sure whether one was being complimented or insulted. Even swear words like "hell" proved ineffectual in German. Twain writes:

> I heard lately of a worn and sorely tried American student who used to fly to a certain German word for relief when he could bear up under his aggravations no longer—the only word whose sound was sweet and precious to his ear and healing to his lacerated spirit. This was the word *damit*. It was only the *sound* that helped him, not the meaning [it merely means, in its general sense, "herewith"]; and so, at last, when he learned that the emphasis was not on the first syllable, his only stay and support was gone, and he faded away and died.
>
> I think that a description of any loud, stirring, tumultuous episode must be tamer in German than in English. Our descriptive words of this character have such a deep, strong, resonant sound, while their German equivalents do seem so thin and mild and energyless. Boom, burst, crash, roar, storm, bellow, blow, thunder, explosion; howl, cry, shout, yell,

> groan; battle, hell. These are magnificent words; the have a force and magnitude of sound befitting the things which they describe. But their German equivalents would be ever so nice to sing the children to sleep with, or else my awe-inspiring ears were made for display and not for superior usefulness in analyzing sounds. Would any man want to die in a battle which was called by so tame a term as a *schlacht*? Or would not a comsumptive feel too much bundled up, who was about to go out, in a shirt-collar and a seal-ring, into a storm which the bird-song word G*ewitter* was employed to describe? And observe the strongest of the several German equivalents for explosion—*ausbruch*. Our word Toothbrush is more powerful than that. It seems to me that the Germans could do worse than import it into their language to describe particularly tremendous explosions with. The German word for hell—Höelle—sounds more like *helly* than anything else; therefore, how necessarily chipper, frivolous, and unimpressive it is. If a man were told in German to go there, could he really rise to the dignity of feeling insulted? (*TA* 614-615)

Keen to the importance of swearing, Twain was adamant that a language must be able to express emotions fully. He and other men depended on such venting.

Sometimes merely the frustration of stifled rage necessitated profanity. According to Hulbert, "it is imperative that, however imperfect human speech must always remain, it shall yet furnish man with words fitted to ease the mind under conditions of deep emotion and to convey one's feelings with force and effectiveness to others" (73). Twain obviously held to this belief. During a visit to New York in 1867, Twain sent a letter to

the San Francisco *Alta California* in which he discusses the necessity of swearing in New York. He writes:

> There is one thing very sure—I can't keep my temper in New York. The cars and carriages always come along and get in the way just as I want to cross a street, and if there is any thing that can make a man soar into flights of sublimity in the matter of profanity, it is that. You know that, yourself. However, I must be accurate—I must speak truth, and say there is one thing that is more annoying. That is to go down West Tenth street hunting for the Art building, No. 51. You are tired, and your feet are hot and swollen, and you wouldn't start, only you calculate that it cannot be more than two blocks away, and you almost feel a genuine desire to go and see the picture on exhibition without once changing your mind. Very well. You come to No. 7; and directly you come to 142! You stare a minute, and then step back and start over again—but it isn't any use—when you are least expecting it, comes that unaccountable jump. You cross over, and find Nos. 18, 20, 22, and then perhaps you jump to 376! Your gall begins to rise. You go on. You get on a trail, at last, the figures leading by regular approaches up toward 51—but when you have walked four blocks they start at 49 and begin to run the other way! You are perspiring and furious by this time, but you keep desperately on, and speculate on new and complicated forms of profanity. And behold, in time the numbers become bewilderingly complicated: on one door is a 3 on a little tin scrap, on the next a 17 in gold characters a foot square, on the

> next a 19, a 5 and a 137, one above the other and in three different styles of figuring! You do not swear any more now, of course, because you can't find any words that are long enough or strong enough to fit the case. You feel degraded and ignominious and subjugated. And there and then you say that you will go away from New York and start over again; and that you will never come back to settle permanently till you have learned to swear with the utmost fluency in seventeen different languages. You become more tranquil, now, because you see your way clearly before you, how that, when you are properly accomplished, you can live in this great city and still be happy; you feel that in that day, when a subject shall defy English, you can try the Arabic, the Hungarian, the Japanese, the Kulu-Kaffir, and when the worst comes to the worst, you can come the Hindostanee on it and conquer. After this, you go tranquilly on for a matter of seventeen blocks and find 51 sandwiched in between Nos. 13 and 32,986. Then you wish you had never been born, to come to a strange land and suffer in this way. (*Alta California Letters* 11 August 1867)

Without profanity, a visitor to New York feels "degraded and ignominious and subjugated" because he cannot verbally express the length and breadth of the metal challenges of residing in an urban chaos.

A more commonplace situation that required profanity related to letter writing. An avid letter-writer over the course of his lifetime, Twain may have written as many as 50,000 letters, 25,000 of which still exist today. One particular frustration Twain faced, however, was remembering to include items in his correspondence. In his hurry to post

his letters, Twain would often forget to enclose some small item, a check or trinket, with his letter, and as a result he would have to address a whole new envelope for the object. Such absent-mindedness left Twain in a storm of swearing. In a letter to Howells, Twain jokes about the issue:

> The box came yesterday, & I enclose check—at least I *mean* to, though one of the hardest things in this life to remember is to enclose a thing—even a dog—in the letter one is writing. It most always goes in another envelop, half an hour later, tottering under a load of profanity which runs it aground at the postoffice for insufficient postage. (*MTHL* vol. 1*: 319*)

Laughingly, the profanity that accompanies the second letter is supposedly so "heavy" that the letter is held up for not having enough stamps.

Another commonly experienced cause for profanity was the abrupt clanging noise of early-morning church bells. In *A Tramp Abroad*, Twain discusses the cacophony of cheap church bells and comments on the importance of being able to swear upon such occasions. He writes:

> We did not oversleep at St. Nicholas. The church-bell began to ring at 4:30 in the morning, and from the length of time it continued to ring I judged that it takes the Swiss sinner a good while to get the invitation through his head. Most church-bells in the world are of poor quality, and have a harsh and rasping sound which upsets the temper and produces much sin, but the St. Nicholas bell is a good deal the worst one that has been contrived yet, and is peculiarly maddening in its operation. Still, it may have its right and its excuse to exist, for the community is

> poor and not every citizen can afford a clock, perhaps; but there cannot be any excuse for our church-bells at home, for there is no family in America without a clock, and consequently there is no fair pretext for the usual Sunday medley of dreadful sounds that issues from our steeples. There is much more profanity in America on Sunday than in all the other six days of the week put together, and it is of a more bitter and malignant character than the week-day profanity, too. It is produced by the cracked-pot clangour of the cheap church-bells. (*TA* 65)

Ironically, the Sunday bells that call parishioners to church are the very bells that cause one of the sins from which churches try to save men. The bells become a sort of profanity-machine, and men around the world must answer their disharmonious ringing with choice expletives.

Writing a letter to his brother in the fall of 1888, Twain illustrates how even a small amount of profanity can be used to release his volcanic emotions. He writes:

> Jesus Christ!—It is perilous to write such a man. You can go crazy on less material than anybody that ever lived. What in hell has produced all these maniacal imaginings? You told me you had hired an attendant for ma. Now hire one instantly, and stop this nonsense of wearing Mollie and yourself out trying to do that nursing yourselves. Hire the attendant, and tell me her cost so that I can instruct Webster & Co. to add it every month to what they already send. Don't fool away any more time about this. And don't write me any more damned rot about "storms," and inability to pay trivial sums of money and—and—hell and damnation! You see I've read

> only the first page of your letter; I wouldn't read the rest for a million dollars.
>
> *Yr*
>
> *SAM.*
>
> P. S. Don't imagine that I have lost my temper, because I swear. I swear all day, but I do not lose my temper. And don't imagine that I am on my way to the poorhouse, for I am not; or that I am uneasy, for I am not; or that I am uncomfortable or unhappy—for I never am. I don't know what it is to be unhappy or uneasy; and I am not going to try to learn how, at this late day. (*MTPLetters* 29 November 1988)

Interestingly, in the postscript Twain denies the emotions that he uses profanity to express. However, in one sense such a denial is warranted, for once he has released his furry, it is for him, in effect, nonexistent.

According to Mark Twain, when one was unable to swear, one was unable to face head-on the worries of life. In a much earlier letter to his brother, Twain cautions Orion to withhold bad news from their mother since her refusal to swear left her less able to deal with such problems. Twain writes:

> Above all things (between you and me) never tell Ma any of your troubles; she never slept a wink the night your last letter came, and she looks distressed yet. Write only cheerful news to her. You know that she will not be satisfied so long as she thinks anything is going on that she is ignorant of—and she makes a little fuss about it when her suspicions are awakened; but that makes no difference—. I know that it is better that she

> be kept in the dark concerning all things of an unpleasant nature. She upbraids me occasionally for giving her only the bright side of my affairs (but unfortunately for her she has to put up with it, for I know that troubles that I curse awhile and forget, would disturb her slumbers for some time.) (Parenthesis No. 2—Possibly because she is deprived of the soothing consolation of swearing.) Tell her the good news and me the bad. (*MTPLetters* 27 June 1860)

Because he was able to "curse awhile," Twain was able to eventually "forget" his worries. His mother, however, was unable to enjoy the "soothing consolation of swearing" and thusly needed to be shielded from the problems in her sons' lives. After all, profanity provides a much-needed psychological release.

Over the course of his life, Twain freely indulged in profanity within distinctly male settings. James B. Pond tells of travelling with Twain for a lecture tour when the author, after suffering from particularly frustrating travel arrangements as well as a chest cold, let loose his tongue. Pond writes:

> On his arrival "Mark" took occasion to blaspheme for a few minutes, that his relative might realize that men are not all alike. He cursed the journey, the fatigues and annoyances, winding up by acknowledging that if everything had been made and arranged by the Almighty for the occasion, it could not have been better or more comfortable, but he "was not travelling for pleasure," etc.... Wednesday, August 14th, Seattle to Whatcom [Bellingham, Wash.]. "Mark's" cold is getting worse (the first cold he's ever had). He worried and fretted all day;

> two swearing fits under his breath, with a short interval between them, they lasted from our arrival in town until he went to sleep after midnight. It was with great difficulty that he got through the lecture.....On August 20th the boat for Victoria arrived half an hour late. We all hurried to get on board, only to be told by the captain that he had one hundred and eighty tons of freight to discharge, and that it would be four o'clock before we left. This lost our Victoria engagement, which I was obliged to postpone by telegraph. "Mark" was not in condition to relish this news, and as he stood on the wharf after the ladies had gone aboard he took occasion to tell the captain, in very plain and impious language, his opinion of a passenger-carrying company that, for a few dollars extra, would violate their contract and obligations to the public. They were a lot of—somethings, and deserved the penitentiary. The captain listened without response, but got very red in the face. It seems the ladies had overheard the loud talk. Soon after "Mark" joined them he came to me and asked if I wouldn't see that captain and apologize for his unmanly abuse, and see if any possible restitution could be made. I did so, and the captain and "Mark" became quite friends. (*TIHOT* 197-199)

Travelling provided Twain with constant opportunity to put his language into use. Writing of the tiring schedule of travelling and lecturing, Twain sent a letter to Thomas Nash, advising him to "be piously grateful ... that you are permitted to remain with your household ... and do all your praying now, for a time is coming when you will have to go railroading and platforming, and then you will find that you cannot pray any more,

because you will have only just time to swear enough" (*EMT* 513). When it comes to travel and there is only time for either praying or swearing, Twain says, out of sheer necessity swearing wins out.

Although profanity was certainly considered more suitable for masculine company, not all of the men whom Twain encountered immediately enjoyed his language. In Twain's notebook, for instance, he recalls an initially unappreciated outburst of profanity in front of a theatre manager. He writes:

> I dropped a strong phrase, in the presence of [theatre]manager K (some others present.) He rebuked me. I was surprised out of my self-possession for two or three awkward moments; then I said, seriously: "I ought to explain. I have often used profane language in the presence of God. As he has always put up with it, I had an idea that maybe a damned theatre manager could stand it." It caught him unexpectedly, & his sudden explosion of laughter shot his false teeth across the corner of his desk, & and they fell at my feet like a trophy. (qtd. in Camfield 450)

Twain's obvious pride over the incident is unmistakable; not only does the word "trophy" indicate Twain's perception of victoriously conquering the manager's prudishness, but his braggadocios tone in his casual reference to swearing in God's presence reveals Twain's inordinate pride in his use of the masculine art of profanity.

In addition to "converting" his listeners to his profanity, Twain also took pleasure in sharing his love of profanity with his other friends who were likewise connoisseurs of swearing. One friend in particular was the Standard Oil millionaire, Henry Huttleston Rogers, who rescued Twain from financial ruin. Of his friend, Twain once said, "the only

man I would give a *damn* for … is a Standard Oil fiend" (qtd. in Sheldon 46). A master of profanity himself, Rogers occasionally got in trouble for his own "salty language," and as Michael Sheldon notes, Rogers "might have made millions more out of the company if he hadn't been so fond of swearing, drinking, and card playing" (48). While Rogers's profanity put him in the outs with fellow businessman John D. Rockefeller, who wanted the moral character of the company's directors to be above reproach, his swearing only further endeared him to Twain. The writer, impressed with his friend's colorful language, once said to Rogers, "Jesus! But I had a narrow escape. Suppose you had gone into humor instead of oil—where would I be?" (qtd. in Sheldon 49). The two men shared a deep fondness for swearing and enjoyed putting such language into practice. Years later, at the funeral of his dear friend in 1909, Twain, weighted with grief at the death of Rogers, was no doubt momentarily revived by the eulogizing of his friend as a man who never "used a coarse, profane, or unworthy word" (qtd. in Sheldon 356).

If he could not get them to employ such language themselves, Twain would contrive situations where profanity could be falsely attributed to them. A favorite prank of Twain's was involving his friends in writing letters using other names (Sheldon 47). Even his dear friend William Dean Howells was not free from this trick. While he often enjoyed Twain's company and colorful language, Howells typically avoided using such language himself. As a result, Twain and Rogers found the idea of their friend Howells swearing to be absolutely absurd, and so they often kidded about practical jokes that would place profanity in their friend's mouth. In 1907, Twain gave Rogers a particularly profane note to send to the editor of the *New York Times*, daring his friend to sign it and send it as if it was written by William Dean Howells. While Twain was the one to

actually write the note, the two friends reveled in the hilarity of such a masquerade being taken seriously by the newspaper. As Michael Sheldon explains, "the joke was that no one as reserved in language and manner as Howells would pen such an illiterate and intemperate letter, and that he would be horrified if the newspaper ever printed it" (48). The note, as quoted in Sheldon's *Mark Twain, Man in White*, page 48, read:

> Sir to you, I would like to know what kind of goddam govment [sic] this is that discriminates between two common carriers & makes a goddam railroad charge everybody equal & lets a goddam man charge any goddam price he wants to for his goddam opera box.
>
> WD Howells
>
> Tuxedo Park Oct 4
>
> (goddam it)

Both well-versed masters of profanity, Twain and Rogers likely "roared with laughter at the idea of anyone agreeing to print such a magnificent verbal explosion under the name of the distinguished, well-mannerd novelist" (Sheldon 48). Probably the note was never sent to the newspaper, but it served its purpose in the amount of amusement it provided the two men. Interestingly, the fictitious note "from Howells" bears remarkable similarity to a note the Twain wrote previously to the Hartford Gas and Electric Company:

> Gentleman:—Someday you are going to move me almost to the point of irritation with your God-damned chuckle headed fashion of turning off your God-damned gas without giving notice to your God-damned parishioners—and you did it again last night. (qtd. in Widger, vol. 4)[2]

While it is unknown whether Twain actually mailed the letter, the mere existence of the note and its similarity to the fake letter "by Howells" indicates that Twain's joke had a basis in reality. Just as Twain jokingly put his swear words into his daughters' mouths, here, too, he puts his own profanity into the "innocent" mouth of his friend.

Although Howells didn't use such language himself, that fact did not dissuade him from joking about it with Twain. When Twain and Howells decided in 1883 to co-write a play about Colonel Sellers, they brainstormed about amusing and absurd ways to add eccentricities to the character of Sellers. As Howells recalls, "We had loads and loads of fun about it" (qtd. in Paine 756). The two laughed about making Sellers a mad scientist, a drunken temperance reformer, and a peerage claimant (Powers 479). In the hilarity that ensued, the two men decided to have Sellers get involved in the business of recording profanity on phonographs in order to sell it to ships officers. As a result of their collusion, Twain wrote the following sketch (which would later be published in *The American Claimant*) in which Colonel Sellers, also known as the earl, takes Hawkins into his laboratory to show him his latest invention:

> Arrived in the "laboratory," the earl continued, "Now, cast your eye around this room— what do you see? *Apparently* a junk-shop; *apparently* a hospital connected with a patent-office—in *reality,* the mines of Golconda in disguise! Look at that thing there. Now what would you take that thing to be?"
>
> "I don't believe I could ever imagine."
>
> "Of course you couldn't. It's my grand adaptation of the phonograph to the marine service. You store up profanity in it for use at

sea. You know that sailors don't fly around worth a cent unless you swear at them—so the mate that can do the best job of swearing is the most valuable man. In great emergencies his talent saves the ship. But a ship is a large thing, and he can't be everywhere at once; so there have been times when one mate has lost a ship which could have been saved if they had had a hundred. Prodigious storms, you know. Well, a ship can't afford a hundred mates; but she can afford a hundred Cursing Phonographs, and distribute them all over the vessel—and there, you see, she's armed at every point. Imagine a big storm, and a hundred of my machines all cursing away at once —splendid spectacle, splendid!—you couldn't hear yourself think. Ship goes through that storm perfectly serene—she's just as safe as she'd be on shore."

"It's a wonderful idea. How do you prepare the thing?"

"Load it—simply load it."

"How?"

"Why, you just stand over it and swear into it."

"That loads it, does it?"

"Yes; because every word it collars it *keeps*— keeps it forever. Never wears out. Any time you turn the crank, out it'll come. In times of great peril you can reverse it, and it'll swear backwards. *That* makes a sailor hump himself!"

"Oh, I see. Who loads them?—the mate?"

"Yes, if he chooses. Or I'll furnish them already loaded. I can hire an expert for seventy-five dollars a month who will load a hundred and fifty phonographs in one hundred and fifty hours, and do it *easy.* And an expert can furnish a stronger article, of course, than the mere average uncultivated mate could. Then, you see, all the ships of the world will buy them ready loaded—for I shall have them loaded in any language a customer wants. Hawkins, it will work the grandest moral reform of the nineteenth century. Five years from now *all* the swearing will be done by machinery—you won't ever hear a profane word come from human lips on a ship. Millions of dollars have been spent by the churches in the effort to abolish profanity in the commercial marine. Think of it— my name will live forever in the affections of good men as the man who, solitary and alone, accomplished this noble and elevating reform."

"Oh, it *is* grand and beneficent and beautiful. How *did* you ever come to think of it? You have a wonderful mind. How did you say you loaded the machine?"

"Oh, it's no trouble—perfectly simple. If you want to load it up loud and strong, you stand right over it and shout. But if you leave it open and all set, it'll *eavesdrop,* so to speak—that is to say, it will load itself up with any sounds that are made within six feet of it. Now I'll show you how it works. I had an expert come and load this one up yesterday. Hello, it's been left open—it's too bad—still I reckon it hasn't had much chance to collect irrelevant stuff. All you do is to press this button in the floor—so."

The phonograph began to sing in a plaintive voice:

There is a boarding-house far far away,

Where they have ham and eggs three times a day.

"Hang it, *that* ain't it. Somebody's been singing around here."

The plaintive song began again, mingled with a low, gradually rising wail of cats slowly warming up toward a fight:

Oh, *how* the boarders yell,

When they hear that dinner-bell—

They give that landlord———

(momentary outburst of terrific cat-fight which drowns out one word)

Three times a day.

(Renewal of furious cat-fight for a moment. The plaintive voice on a high, fierce key, *"Scat,* you devils!" and a racket as of flying missiles.)

"Well, never mind—let it go. I've got some sailor profanity down in there somewhere, if I could get to it. But it isn't any matter; you see how the machine works."

Hawkins responded, with enthusiasm:

"Oh, it works admirably! I know there's a hundred fortunes in it."

"And mind, the Hawkins family get their share, Washington."

"Oh, thanks, thanks; you are just as generous as ever. Ah, it's the grandest invention of the age!" (*American Claimant* 156-159)

While not an ardent subscriber of profanity himself, Howells believed that this sketch about it "[worked] admirably" and would prove to be part of the "grandest" play "of the age."

Twain's fictitious invention to reduce the common man's prodigious swearing had a basis in reality; Twain had himself invented a self-pasting scrapbook in August 1872 and received a patent on it in June 1873. In a letter to Daniel Slote, co-owner of Slote's blank-book manufacturing firm—Slote, Woodman and Company—Twain explains his invention:

> My Dear Slote:—I have invented & patented a new Scrap Book, not to make money out of it, but to economise the profanity of this country. You know that when the average man wants to put something in his scrap book he can't find his paste—then he swears; or if he finds it, it is dried so hard that it is only fit to eat—then he swears; if he uses mucilage it mingles with the ink, & next year he can't read his scrap—the result is barrels & barrels of profanity. This can all be saved & devoted to other irritating things, where it will do more real & lasting good, simply by substituting my self-pasting Scrap Book for the old-fashioned one.
>
> If Messrs. Slote, Woodman & Co. wish to publish this Scrap Book of mine, I shall be willing. You see by the above paragraph that it is a sound moral work, & this will commend it to editors & clergymen, & in fact to all right feeling people. If you want testimonials I can get them, & of the best sort, & from the best people. One of the most refined & cultivated young ladies in Hartford (daughter of a clergyman) told me

> herself, with grateful tears standing in her eyes, that since she began using my Scrap Book she has not sworn a single oath. (*MTPLetters* 11 September 1876)

Slote so enjoyed the humor of Twain's letter, that in addition to agreeing to sell the scrapbook (which his company would manufacture for the next thirty-five years), he used Twain's letter as part of his marketing campaign for the product, publishing it in the *New York Herald* in December of 1876 as well as in other papers.

Twain typically sought to keep his profanity confined to the masculine world of business, but when women ventured into this sphere, he did not seem to mind letting his tongue loose in front of such an audience. For example, when Twain met Helen Keller at a gathering of mostly men, the two shared an unexplainable understanding of one another's condition. Over the course of their friendship, Twain intuited her experience of blindness, and she, in turn, understood the beauty of his flaming words. Keller recalls:

> He knew with keen and sure intuition many things about me; how it felt to be blind and not to be able to keep up with the swift ones—things that others learned slowly or not at all. He never embarrassed me by saying how terrible it is not to see, or how dull life must be, lived always in the dark. He wove about my dark walls romance and adventure which made me feel happy and important. Once when Peter Dunne, the irrepressible Mr. Dooley, exclaimed, "God! How dull it must be for her; every day the same, and every night the same as day," Mr. Clemens said, "You're damned wrong there. Blindness is exciting business, I tell you. If

> you don't believe it, get up some dark night on the wrong side of your bed when the house is on fire and try to find the door." (*TIHOT* 308)

Later, when Keller and Twain met in Princeton, Twain boldly discussed the government's action in the Philippines. Keller recalls:

> Upon these military exploits Mr. Clemens poured out a volume of invective and ridicule. Only those who heard him can know his deep fervor and the potency of his flaming words. All his life he fought injustice wherever he saw it in the relations between man and man, in politics, and in war. I loved his views on public affairs, perhaps because they were so often the same as my own.
>
> He thought he was a cynic, but his cynicism did not make him indifferent to the sight of cruelty, unkindness, meanness, or pretentiousness. He would often say, "Helen," the world is full of unseeing eyes—vacant, staring, soulless eyes." He would work himself into a frenzy over dull acquiescence in any evil that could be remedied. True, sometimes it seemed as if he let loose the artillery of Heaven against an intruding mouse. But even then his "resplendent vocabulary" was a delight. Even when his ideas were quite wrong they were expressed with such lucidity, conviction, and aggressiveness that one felt impelled to accept them—for the moment at least. (*TIHOT* 309)

Within masculine settings Helen Keller was able to appreciate Twain's raw and "resplendent" language.

Although Twain would occasionally swear in front of women or would jokingly comment about the little profanities that escaped female lips, he generally held to the belief that the artfully developed hard swearing ought to be left solely to men. The only women who ought to use such intensely profane language, and generally the only women he ever described using it, were career drunks and actresses, two professions not unlike one another in his eyes. In an early 1870 editorial during his time at the *Buffalo Express*, Twain writes about "The Blondes," a female acting troupe whose use of profanity was particularly unflattering. Of their performance, he writes:

> And they play pieces that are vapid and pointless; pitiable medleys of dramatized idiocy, a tiresome clack of rhymes, and a doleful procession of tasteless jokes made toothsome with obscenity. About one scene is generally enough to satisfy a person of only a mere ordinary groveling taste. For instance, that auction scene—wherein you may hear, in fifteen minutes, more abject silliness, and more bad rhymes, and aimless jokes, vulgarity, slang, and obscenity, issue from female lips than ought to be distributed over the female utterances of fifteen years of all the she-rowdies that be upon the stage.... (*BE* 158)

While a small bit of language may be overlooked (or even enjoyed in the case of Olivia's "sugar"), too much profanity reveals a character flaw in which a woman seems to revolt against the very nature of her sex. In addition to the Blondes' excessive profanity, Twain notes their general debasement, citing the fact that "they come on stage naked, to all intents and purposes; padded; painted; powdered; oiled; enameled; and glorified with

false hair. They are coarsely, vulgarly voluptuous" (*BE* 157). Their use of vile swearing merely reinforces their wild and uncouth personas.

In a series of letters in the *Galaxy* published in 1870, Twain writes of two profane women his narrator, a "Chinaman" named Ah Son Hi, encountered during his trip to San Francisco and subsequent internment in a local prison. In the letter Hi writes:

> Ours was a big general cell, it seemed, for the temporary accommodation of all comers whose crimes were trifling. Among us there were two Americans, two "Greasers" (Mexicans), a Frenchman, a German, four Irishmen, a Chilenean (and, in the next cell, only separated from us by a grating, two women), all drunk, and all more or less noisy; and as night fell and advanced, they grew more and more discontented and disorderly, occasionally shaking the prison bars and glaring through them at the slowly pacing officer, and cursing him with all their hearts. The two women were nearly middle-aged, and they had only had enough liquor to stimulate instead of stupefy them. Consequently they would fondle and kiss each other for some minutes, and then fall to fighting and keep it up till they were just two grotesque tangles of rags and blood and tumbled hair. Then they would rest awhile, and pant and swear. While they were affectionate they always spoke of each other as "ladies," but while they were fighting "strumpet" was the mildest name they could think of—and they could only make that do by tacking some sounding profanity to it. In their last fight, which was toward midnight, one of them bit off the other's finger, and then the officer interfered and put the "Greaser" into the "dark

cell" to answer for it—because the woman that did it laid it on him, and the other woman did not deny it because, as she said afterward, she "wanted another crack at the huzzy when her finger quit hurting," and so she did not want her removed. By this time those two women had mutilated each other's clothes to that extent that there was not sufficient left to cover their nakedness. I found that one of these creatures had spent nine years in the county jail, and that the other one had spent about four or five years in the same place. They had done it from choice. As soon as they were discharged from captivity they would go straight and get drunk, and then steal some trifling thing while an officer was observing them. That would entitle them to another two months in jail, and there they would occupy clean, airy apartments, and have good food in plenty, and being at no expense at all, they could make shirts for the clothiers at half a dollar apiece and thus keep themselves in smoking tobacco and such other luxuries as they wanted. When the two months were up, they would go just as straight as they could walk to Mother Leonard's and get drunk; and from there to Kearney street and steal something; and thence to this city prison, and next day back to the old quarters in the county jail again. One of them had really kept this up for nine years and the other four or five, and both said they meant to end their days in that prison. Finally, both these creatures fell upon me while I was dozing with my head against their grating, and battered me considerably, because they discovered that I was a Chinaman, and they said I was "a bloody interlopin' loafer come from

> the divil's own country to take the bread out of dacent people's mouths and put down the wages for work whin it was all a Christian could do to kape body and sowl together as it was." "Loafer" means one who will not work. ("Goldsmith's Friend" 728)

Clearly, Twain emphasizes the debauched nature of the two female drunks. Not only does he repeatedly discuss their excessive profanity—it's mentioned four times within this short letter—but he couples it with other derogatory statements indicating the lowliness of their class and character. In addition to their hard swearing, the women are reckless career drunks, sexually perverted, and careless about their appearance and modesty; they are also ignorant, illiterate, and racist. The association between the women's profanity and their other vices and character flaws is unmistakable.

Perhaps the most biting discussion of women and profanity appears in Twain's description of the "Countess" who owned the less-than-satisfactory Villa di Quarto the Clemens family stayed in during their stint in Italy in 1904. Of his landlady, he writes:

> The Countess is two or three years past forty, and by the generous supply of portraits and photographs of her distributed over the house one perceives that she has once been comely and at intervals pretty. She now paints her face and dyes her hair, and in other ways tries to preserve the tradition of those lost days; but she carries that within her which defeats the dearest efforts of art and spoils their attempts to keep her exterior aspects in satisfactory shape. That interior something is her spirit, her disposition. She is excitable, malicious, malignant, vengeful, unforgiving, selfish, stingy, avaricious, coarse, vulgar, profane, obscene, a furious

> blusterer on the outside and at heart a coward. Her lips are as familiar with lies, deceptions, swindles and treacheries as are her nostrils with breath. She has not a single friend in Florence, she is not received in any house. I think she is the best hated person I have ever known, and the most liberally despised. She is an oppressor by nature, and a taker of mean advantages. She is hated by every peasant and every person on the estate and in the neighborhood of it, with the single exception of her paramour, the steward. (*Auto2* 237)

Although the Countess was once was beautiful, and in her old age tries to regain her physical appeal, the blackness of her heart mars any effort at regaining her charms. Twain provides a laundry list of her sins; among her other deficiencies, she is "excitable, malicious, malignant, vengeful, unforgiving, selfish, stingy, avaricious, coarse, vulgar, profane, obscene, a furious blusterer on the outside and at heart a coward." While Twain usually described profanity as "sublime" and "good-natured," here he counts it as a character flaw. Further emphasizing her depravity, Twain repeats the almost synonymous terms of "coarse," "vulgar," "profane," and "obscene," accentuating the disparity between the language that was typically expected of the early twentieth century "angel in the house" and the low-down, raw and masculine language that the Countess utilized.

Twain's own use of profanity reveals more than just his love of colorful and, at times, socially rebellious language. There was another, darker half to this coin. While Twain was quick to anger and generally (once he vented his vituperation) quick to cool, there were times when Twain held onto a grudge almost indefinitely. His feud with one-time friend Bret Harte has been well publicized and critically examined, and it perfectly

illustrates his seemingly endless wellspring of wrath. Less well-known, however, is Twain's temporary obsession with Whitelaw Reid, an editor at the New York *Tribune,* whom Twain believed was insulting him in print. In the following letter, Twain reveals the darker side to his profanity—the deep fire that was ready to erupt and obliterate his target at the slightest hint of insult or slight (real or imagined). Twain writes:

> My Dear Howells,—Nobody knows better than I, that there are times when swearing cannot meet the emergency. How sharply I feel that, at this moment. Not a single profane word has issued from my lips this morning—I have not even had the *impulse* to swear, so wholly ineffectual would swearing have manifestly been, in the circumstances. But I will tell you about it.
>
> About three weeks ago, a sensitive friend, approaching his revelation cautiously, intimated that the N. Y. Tribune was engaged in a kind of crusade against me. This seemed a higher compliment than I deserved; but no matter, it made me very angry. I asked many questions, and gathered, in substance, this: Since Reid's return from Europe, the Tribune had been flinging sneers and brutalities at me with such persistent frequency "as to attract general remark." I was an angered—which is just as good an expression, I take it, as an hungered. Next, I learned that Osgood, among the rest of the "general," was worrying over these constant and pitiless attacks. Next came the testimony of another friend, that the attacks were not merely "frequent," but "almost daily." Reflect

upon that: "Almost daily" insults, for two months on a stretch. What would you have done?

As for me, I did the thing which was the natural thing for me to do, that is, I set about contriving a plan to accomplish one or the other of two things: 1. Force a peace; or 2. Get revenge. When I got my plan finished, it pleased me marvelously. It was in six or seven sections, each section to be used in its turn and by itself; the assault to begin at once with No. 1, and the rest to follow, one after the other, to keep the communication open while I wrote my biography of Reid. I meant to wind up with this latter great work, and then dismiss the subject for good.

Well, ever since then I have worked day and night making notes and collecting and classifying material. I've got collectors at work in England. I went to New York and sat three hours taking evidence while a stenographer set it down. As my labors grew, so also grew my fascination. Malice and malignity faded out of me—or maybe I drove them out of me, knowing that a malignant book would hurt nobody but the fool who wrote it. I got thoroughly in love with this work; for I saw that I was going to write a book which the very devils and angels themselves would delight to read, and which would draw disapproval from nobody but the hero of it, (and Mrs. Clemens, who was bitter against the whole thing.) One part of my plan was so delicious that I had to try my hand on it right away, just for the luxury of it. I set about it, and sure enough it panned out to admiration. I wrote that chapter most carefully, and I couldn't find a fault

with it. (It was not for the biography—no, it belonged to an immediate and deadlier project.)

Well, five days ago, this thought came into my mind (from Mrs. Clemens's): "Wouldn't it be well to make sure that the attacks have been 'almost daily'?—and to also make sure that their number and character will justify me in doing what I am proposing to do?"

I at once set a man to work in New York to seek out and copy every unpleasant reference which had been made to me in the Tribune from Nov. 1st to date. On my own part I began to watch the current numbers, for I had subscribed for the paper.

The result arrived from my New York man this morning. O, what a pitiable wreck of high hopes! The "almost daily" assaults, for two months, consist of—1. Adverse criticism of P. & P. from an enraged idiot in the London Atheneum; 2. Paragraph from some indignant Englishman in the Pall Mall Gazette who pays me the vast compliment of gravely rebuking some imaginary ass who has set me up in the neighborhood of Rabelais; 3. A remark of the Tribune's about the Montreal dinner, touched with an almost invisible satire; 4. A remark of the Tribune's about refusal of Canadian copyright, not complimentary, but not necessarily malicious—and of course adverse criticism which is not malicious is a thing which none but fools irritate themselves about.

There—that is the prodigious bugaboo, in its entirety! Can you conceive of a man's getting himself into a sweat over so diminutive a

provocation? I am sure I can't. What the devil can those friends of mine have been thinking about, to spread these 3 or 4 harmless things out into two months of daily sneers and affronts? The whole offense, boiled down, amounts to just this: one uncourteous remark of the Tribune about my book—not me between Nov. 1 and Dec. 20; and a couple of foreign criticisms (of my writings, not me,) between Nov. 1 and Jan. 26! If I can't stand that amount of friction, I certainly need reconstruction. Further boiled down, this vast outpouring of malice amounts to simply this: one jest from the Tribune (one can make nothing more serious than that out of it.) One jest—and that is all; for the foreign criticisms do not count, they being matters of news, and proper for publication in anybody's newspaper.

And to offset that one jest, the Tribune paid me one compliment Dec. 23, by publishing my note declining the New York New England dinner, while merely (in the same breath,) mentioning that similar letters were read from General Sherman and other men whom we all know to be persons of real consequence.

Well, my mountain has brought forth its mouse, and a sufficiently small mouse it is, God knows. And my three weeks' hard work have got to go into the ignominious pigeon-hole. Confound it, I could have earned ten thousand dollars with infinitely less trouble. However, I shouldn't have done it, for I am too lazy, now, in my sere and yellow leaf, to be willing to work for anything but love. (*MTHL* vol. 1: 386-389)

While profanity and anger are often accepted traits within the world of men, at times Twain went too far in his vituperation. Though certainly Twain's sudden eruptions of profanity are amusing to modern-day readers, they reveal a much more serious issue of anger that plagued Twain his entire life. Always boiling underneath the surface and threatening to burst forth at a moment's notice, Twain's wrath troubled him throughout his life and caused many unforgivable wounds in his relationships. Luckily, in the case above, the tempering influence of Livy saved him from publishing his completely unwarranted diatribe against Reid; however, Livy was not always there to prevent such reckless malice, and Twain often nursed his grudges long after the object of his ire had passed away.

Notes

1. This letter may be found online as part of the compendium of letters, *Mark Twain's Letters, 1853–1880*, published by the Mark Twain Project Online (MTPO). The MTPO is produced by the Mark Twain Papers and Project of The Bancroft Library in collaboration with the University of California Press, and the website is hosted by UC Berkeley's Library Systems Office. Because of the chronological organization of Twain's letters on the site, this and subsequent letters will be cited by date for easy reader reference.

2. This unsent letter by Twain is quoted in an editorial note in *Mark Twain's Letters 1853-1910, Complete* which was published online by Project Gutenberg on August 21, 2006 as EBook #3199. David Widger produced this Ebook using the letters originally edited and arranged by Albert Bigelow Paine in 1917. His editorial note containing Twain's note to the Hartford Gas and Electric Company accompanies an undated letter in the beginning of volume 4 of the Ebook, which contains Twain's letters from 1886-1900.

CHAPTERVII

Profanity in Twain's works

When Twain struggled to find his place among the New England literati, his use of profanity played a significant role in his self-identification as an author. On the one hand, Twain strove to be considered one of them and respected as a reputable author. Yet Twain, particularly in the creation of his literary persona, also sought to break free from their stifling conventions and rigid highbrow norms. As scholar Louis Budd notes, Twain "balanced his sentimentality with his rough and tumble wild west mannerisms, and he seemed to embrace opportunities to reinforce his persona as, in the words of a good many editorials 'intensely human'" (16). By sprinkling a good measure of profanity in his conversation and works, Twain could descend from the marble pedestal of the literati and become a person again, just like his readers, and thereby win their affection and loyalty. In *Our Mark Twain: The Making of His Public Personality*, Louis J. Budd remarks that the American people's affinity for Twain as an author and literary persona revolved around his ability to at once be gloriously brilliant and as human and conventional as any one of them (4). To understand the general public's embrace of the author whom they felt was one of their own, one must, as Budd suggests, consider "the shifting triangle formed by the effects of his writings, the personae he tried to create in his other activities, and the image of him haphazardly constructed by the public" (10). In the development of his persona, Twain convinced readers of his essential kinship with them through his use of vernacular and profane language and common-place mannerism. Budd explains:

> In context this reminded Twain fanciers of sticky patches like his "querulous and almost crabbed moods" and of sins like his "flamboyant" profanity, which he had not bothered to suppress for Hellen Keller—to her delight. Bolder hints celebrated his "racier ruder speech for more masculine, stalwart ears" that could appreciate his "Rabelaisian joy in human comedy." To the end Twain's lounging carelessness about clothing and manners had charmed those males who resented the mother's and wife's determination to "comb" them "all to hell" (in Huck Finn's words). A few hearty truthtellers went on to specify Twain's pleasure in good whiskey and the company that social drink gathers. In starchier words, though his married life showed an "escutcheon [that was] blameless and white as a lily flower," "he was no anemic mollycoddle, but very much of a man among men" (16).

Both as writer and lecturer, Twain continued to craft his image, and, according to Budd, "as for profanity, he grew into a connoisseur of its vividness, implying an esthetic scale that grittily reasserted its vitality as a folk art" (58).

When it came to his writings, Twain wasn't afraid to use a bit of language when he needed to create an intensely human and relatable character. William Dean Howells explains Twain's use of profanity in his literary work the following way:

> Throughout my long acquaintance with him his graphic touch was always allowing itself a freedom which I cannot bring my fainter pencil to illustrate. He had the Southwestern, the Lincolnian, the Elizabethan breadth of parlance, which I suppose I ought not to call coarse without

> calling one's self prudish; and I was often hiding away in indiscreet holes and corners the letters in which he had loosed his bold fancy to stoop on rank suggestion; I could not bear to burn them, and I could not, after first reading, quite bear to look at them. (*TIHOT* 80-81)

This graphic touch most often appeared in his works that featured frame narratives in which gentlemanly outsiders interact with voluble foul-mouthed locals. Of Twain's many sketches, Everett Emerson notes:

> His narrators, usually veterans of long service in their occupations (including miners, ship captains, and stage drivers), are utterly lacking in self-consciousness. As the man behind the writer became more interested in moving upward in the social scale, he found that when he wished to avoid presenting Mark Twain as too "low" and vulgar a personage, he could introduce a vernacular narrator such as the coach driver to tell his tale. He especially enjoyed relying on characters who were both colorfully profane and profoundly innocent (18).

The vulgar narrator who forces an unwilling refined bystander (and amusingly, the audience as well) to hear an absurd tale is perhaps the most common of Twain's literary devices. From the garrulous Simon Wheeler to the fictitious Mr. Brown of Twain's travel narratives, the colorful uneducated rustic or clown provides Twain ample opportunity to develop his use of distinct dialect and employ the occasional expletive. As Don Florence points out in his work *Persona and Humor in Mark Twain's Early Writings*, the "framed narrative" has commonly been recognized as an accepted duality for introducing rough and uncouth speech to sophisticated readers (52).

Less commonly discussed, however, is Twain's fondness for a literary structure in which a sometimes long and rambling tale ended with profanity—either spoken by an unlikely speaker (such as an innocent child or a well-respected pillar of the community) or in the presence of an unlikely audience (such as a refined gentlewoman or a member of the clergy). In the following sketch, for example, Twain illustrates the usefulness of language spoken at just the right moment. Here Twain discusses "the lamented Dr. McDowell, whose name was so great and so honored in the Mississippi Valley a decade before the Civil War" (*Auto2* 12). Twain writes:

> He was a physician as well as a surgeon; and sometimes in cases where medicines failed to save, he developed other resources. He fell out, once, with a family whose physician he was, and after that they ceased to employ him. But a time came when he was once more called. The lady of the house was very ill, and had been given up by her doctors. He came into the room and stopped, and stood still, and looked around upon the scene; he had his great slouch hat on, and a quarter of an acre of gingerbread under his arm, and while he looked meditatively about, he broke hunks from his cake, munched them, and let the crumbs dribble down his breast to the floor. The lady lay pale and still, with her eyes closed; about the bed, in the solemn hush, were grouped the family softly sobbing, some standing, some kneeling. Presently the doctor began to take up the medicine bottles and sniff at them contemptuously and throw them out of the open window. When they were all gone he ranged up to the bed,

> laid his slab of gingerbread on the dying woman's breast, and said roughly—
>
> "What are you idiots sniveling about?—there's nothing the matter with this humbug. Put out your tongue!"
>
> The sobbings stopped and the angry mourners changed their attitudes and began to upbraid the doctor for his cruel behavior in this chamber of death; but he interrupted them with an explosion of profane abuse, and said—
>
> "A pack of snuffling fat-wits, do you think you can teach me my business? I tell you there is nothing the matter with the woman—nothing the matter but laziness. What she wants is a beefsteak and a washtub. With her damned society training, she—"
>
> Then the dying woman rose up in bed, and the light of battle was in her eye. She poured out upon the doctor her whole insulted mind—just a volcanic irruption, accompanied by thunder and lightning, whirlwinds and earthquakes, pumice stone and ashes. It brought the reaction which he was after, and she got well. (*Auto*2 12)

In this tale, both the respected doctor and society woman unexpectedly use profanity, but their language serves its purpose, and in the end the woman is cured from her deathbed.

Always a fan of words and their intrinsic rightness in certain situations, Twain no doubt felt a distinct pleasure when he could play off the meaning of a profane word in order to make a pun. One such witticism occurred in an article about Niagara Falls published in the *Buffalo Express*. Twain writes:

> Niagara Falls is one of the finest structures in the known world. I have been visiting this favorite watering place recently, for the first time, and was well pleased. A gentleman who was with me said it was customary to be disappointed in the Falls, but that subsequent visits were sure to set that all right. He said it was so with him. He said that the first time he went the hack fares were so much higher than the Falls that the Falls appeared insignificant. But that is all regulated now. The hackmen have been tamed, and numbered, and placarded, and blackguarded, and brought into subjection to the law, and dosed with Moral Principle till they are as meek as missionaries. They are divided into two clans, now, the Regulars and the Privateers, and they employ their idle time in warning the public against each other. The Regulars are under the hotel banners, and do the legitimate at two dollars an hour, and the Privateers prowl darkly on neutral ground and pick off stragglers at half price. But there are no more outrages and extortions. That sort of thing cured itself. It made the Falls unpopular by getting into the newspapers, and whenever a public evil achieves that sort of a success for itself, its days are numbered. It became apparent that either the Falls had to be discontinued or the hackmen had to subside. They could not dam the Falls, and so they damned the hackmen. One can be comfortable and happy there now. (*BE* 12)

Here Twain utilizes identical pronunciations of the homophones "dam" and "damn" in order to create his humorous paronomasia, or play on words.

Pleased with his own masterful use of profanity, Twain was unashamed to include it to a certain extent in his works. Twain himself defended it in print, saying, "If I choose to use the language of the vulgar, the low-flung and sinful, and such as will shock the ears of the highly civilized, I don't want him [a compositor] to appoint himself an editorial critic and proceed to tone me down and save me from the consequences of my conduct; that is, unless I pay him for it, which I won't" (qtd. in Emerson 17). If a swear word was needed for the efficacy of a sketch, Twain wasn't afraid to include it—even if that meant repeating as many times as necessary. For example, in a short sketch entitled "'Party Cries' In Ireland," Twain brazenly uses the phrase "to hell with" over a half a dozen times:

> BELFAST is a peculiarly religious community. This may be said of the whole of the North of Ireland. About one-half of the people are Protestants and the other half Catholics. Each party does all it can to make its own doctrines popular and draw the affections of the irreligious toward them. One hears constantly of the most touching instances of this zeal. A week ago a vast concourse of Catholics assembled at Armagh to dedicate a new Cathedral; and when they started home again the roadways were lined with groups of meek and lowly Protestants who stoned them till all the region round about was marked with blood. I thought that only Catholics argued in that way, but it seems to be a mistake.
>
> Every man in the community is a missionary and carries a brick to admonish the erring with. The law has tried to break this up, but not with perfect success. It has decreed that irritating "party cries" shall not be

> indulged in, and that persons uttering them shall be fined forty shillings and costs. And so, in the police court reports every day, one sees these fines recorded. Last week a girl twelve years old was fined the usual forty shillings and costs for proclaiming in the public streets that she was "a Protestant." The usual cry is, "To hell with the Pope!" or "To hell with the Protestants!" according to the utterer's system of salvation.
>
> One of Belfast's local jokes was very good. It referred to the uniform and inevitable fine of forty shillings and costs for uttering a party cry — and it is no economical fine for a poor man, either, by the way. They say that a policeman found a drunken man lying on the ground, up a dark alley, entertaining himself with shouting, "To *hell* with!" "To *hell* with!" The officer smelt a fine — informers get half.
>
> "What's that you say?"
>
> "To *hell* with!"
>
> "To hell with *who?* To hell with *what?"*
>
> "Ah, bedad ye can finish it yourself — it's too expinsive for me!"
>
> I think the seditious disposition, restrained by the economical instinct, is finely put in that. (*Sketches* 346-347)

Certainly readers with priggish attitudes about profanity would be startled by the pervasiveness of the language in this sketch, and yet for all its repetition of the phrase "to hell with," the sketch feels linguistically inoffensive.

Even when he did not explicitly use profane language in his stories, Twain frequently referred to swearing either by describing it in euphemistic terms or by dashing

out the more profane words but leading the reader to fill in the blanks through the common syntax and flow of swearing. For instance, in the following tale Twain and his travelling companions meet two Americans, a reverend and a profane young man, on the streets of Germany, and the two have an interesting and profane conversation. In *A Tramp Abroad*, Twain writes:

> I had been vaguely conscious, for a while, of a person who was walking in the street abreast of us; I had glanced furtively at him once or twice, and noticed that he was a fine, large, vigorous young fellow, with an open, independent countenance, faintly shaded with a pale and even almost imperceptible crop of early down, and that he was clothed from head to heel in cool and enviable snow-white linen. I thought I had also noticed, that his head had a sort of listening tilt to it. Now about this time the Rev. Mr. said,—
>
> "The side-walk is hardly wide enough for three, so I will walk behind; but keep the talk going, keep the talk going, there's no time to lose, and you may be sure I will do my share." He ranged himself behind us, and straightway that stately snow-white young fellow closed up to the side-walk alongside him, fetched him a cordial slap on the shoulder with his broad palm, and sung out with a hearty cheeriness,—
>
> "*Americans,* for two-and-a-half and the money up! *Hey!*"
>
> The Reverend winced, but said mildly,—
>
> "Yes,—we are Americans."

"Lord love you, you can just bet that's what *I* am, every time! Put it there!"

He held out his Sahara of a palm, and the Reverend laid his diminutive hand in it, and got so cordial a shake that we heard his glove burst under it.

"Say, didn't I put you up right?"

"O, yes."

"Sho! I spotted you for my kind the minute I heard your clack. You been over here long?"

"About four months. Have you been over long?"

"Long? Well I should say so! Going on two *years,* by geeminy! Say, are you homesick?"

"No, I can't say that I am. Are you?"

"Oh, *hell* yes!" This with immense enthusiasm.

The Reverend shrunk a little, in his clothes, and we were aware, rather by instinct than otherwise, that he was throwing out signals of distress to us; but we did not interfere or try to succor him, for we were quite happy.

The young fellow hooked his arm into the Reverend's, now, with the confiding and grateful air of a waif who has been longing for a friend, and a sympathetic ear, and a chance to lisp once more the sweet accents of the mother tongue,— and then he limbered up the muscles of his mouth and turned himself loose,—and with such a relish! Some of his words

were not Sunday school words, so I am obliged to put blanks where they occur.

"Yes indeedy! If *I* ain't an American there *ain't* any Americans, that's all. And when I heard you fellows gassing away in the good old American language, I'm ——— if it wasn't all I could do to keep from hugging you! My tongue's all warped with trying to curl it around these —— —— forsaken wind-galled nine-jointed German words here; now I *tell* you it's awful good to lay it over a Christian word once more and kind of let the old taste soak in. I'm from western New York. My name is Cholley Adams. I'm a student, you know. Been here going on two years. I'm learning to be a horse-doctor. I *like* that part of it, you know, but —— —— these people, they won't learn a fellow in his own language, they make him learn in German; so before I could tackle the horse-doctoring I had to tackle this miserable language."

"First-off, I thought it would certainly give me the botts, but I don't mind it now. I've got it where the hair's short, I think; and dontchuknow, they made me learn Latin, too. Now between you and me, I wouldn't give a ——— for all the Latin that was ever jabbered; and the first thing *I* calculate to do when I get through, is to just sit down and forget it. 'Twont take me long, and I don't mind the time, anyway. And I tell you what! the difference between school-teaching over yonder and school-teaching over here, — sho! *We* don't know anything about it! Here you've got to peg and peg and peg and there just ain't any let-up,—and

what you learn here, you've got to *know,* dontchuknow,—or else you'll have one of these —— —— spavined, spectacled, ring-boned, knock-kneed old professors in your hair. I've been here long *enough,* and I'm getting blessed tired of it, mind I *tell* you. The old man wrote me that he was coming over in June, and said he'd take me home in August, whether *I* was done with my education or not, but durn him, he didn't come; never said why; just sent me a hamper of Sunday school books, and told me to be good, and hold on a while. I don't take to Sunday school books, dontchuknow, —I don't hanker after them when I can get pie,—but I *read* them, anyway, because whatever the old man tells me to do, that's the thing that I'm a-going to *do,* or tear something you know. I buckled in and read all of those books, because he wanted me to; but that kind of thing don't excite *me,* I like something *hearty.* But I'm awful homesick. I'm homesick from ear-socket to crupper, and from crupper to hock joint; but it ain't any use, I've got to stay here, till the old man drops the rag and gives the word,—yes, *sir,* right here in this —— —— country I've got to linger till the old man says *Come!*—and you bet your bottom dollar, Johnny, it *ain't* just as easy as it is for a cat to have twins!"

At the end of this profane and cordial explosion he fetched a prodigious "*Whoosh!*" to relieve his lungs and make recognition of the heat, and then he straightway dived into his narrative again for "Johnny's" benefit, beginning,

> "Well, —— —— it ain't any use talking, some of those old American words *do* have a kind of a bully swing to them; a man can *express* himself with 'em,—a man can get at what he wants to *say,* dontchuknow."
>
> When we reached our hotel and it seemed that he was about to lose the Reverend, he showed so much sorrow, and begged so hard and so earnestly that the Reverend's heart was not hard enough to hold out against the pleadings,—so he went away with the parent-honoring student, like a right Christian, and took supper with him in his lodgings and sat in the surf-beat of his slang and profanity till near midnight, and then left him,—left him pretty well talked out, but grateful "clear down to his frogs," as he expressed it. The Reverend said it had transpired during the interview that "Cholley" Adams's father was an extensive dealer in horses in western New York; this accounted for Cholley's choice of a profession. The Reverend brought away a pretty high opinion of Cholley as a manly young fellow, with stuff in him for a useful citizen; he considered him rather a rough gem, but a gem, nevertheless. (191-195)

While the only explicitly profane expression in this sketch was the young man's "Oh, *hell* yes!", the euphemistic swearing, such as the "wind-galled nine-jointed German words" and the "spavined, spectacled, ring-boned, knock-kneed old professors," efficiently carry the profane spirit of the speaker's words. Furthermore, the syntax leading up to the dashed out swear words leaves little to the imagination.

In addition to the obvious humor of rough language spoken in the presence of such unfit pious ears in the sketch above, Twain here and more generally elsewhere uses uncouth language in his writing to depict the reality of human existence without the pretentions of social and moral posturing. Perhaps Don Florence explains it best when he writes:

> Just as in his hoaxes, burlesques, and fantasies, Twain's linguistic games keep the reader guessing by shifting tones, perspectives, and contexts. The reader is led from the logical to the absurd, from the lofty to the vulgar (or vice versa), from one language or value system to another. Such linguistic lightfootedness lets Twain wander where he chooses and not be tied to any one perspective. He shows that many of our ideas about the world and ourselves are rooted in associated contexts; stripping away such contexts allows for new, unsettling possibilities. Philological play lets him suggest what an intricate, messy, funny business life is, and how little we understand it—or ourselves—despite our pretentions. (49)

In a way, the use of swearing and profanity allows Twain to raise a more realistic mirror that reflects to the readers man's absurdities. As a result, Twain openly acknowledged the usefulness of profane language in his writings. For example, in a letter to Howells, Twain said, "I have noticed that a little judicious profanity helps out an otherwise ineffectual sketch or poem remarkably" (*MTPLetters* 15 January 1875). When Mary Mason Fairbanks, a dear friend whom Twain affectionately called "Mother," was considering publishing a book and asked Twain to write the introduction, Twain not only agreed, but he jokingly offered to add a bit of profanity to it to improve its quality. He wrote, "I

remember that I liked your letters well—barring the lack of malignity & profanity—a thing which is bound to make one's literature too uniformly smooth & gentle. But when your proof-sheets issue, I will brisk them up a little in these respects if you like" (*MTPLetters* 31 October 1877). However, when choosing to use profanity, Twain had to walk a fine line between language that would improve a sketch and language that would offend readers and alienate his adoring public.

When Twain used profanity that printers and editors felt was not in good taste, they often chose to strike through offensive content and print dashes or underscores in the proofs, especially when Twain's works were intended for newspapers or literary magazines. In many of these cases Twain conceded to this censoring; however, Twain could not stand for any editors to put words into his mouth by replacing Twain's words with words that the editors thought were better. Dan Beard tells the story of one such incident. Beard writes:

> When Mark Twain sent the manuscript of *Tom Sawyer Abroad* to St. Nicholas, there was a part of it which the editor thought might be improved, and the wording consequently changed. Mark Twain was a gentle soul, but if Theodore Roosevelt stood for civic righteousness, Mark Twain stood for the unalienable rights of the author to his own statements. When Mark read the proof he was exceedingly wroth and, entering the sanctum sanctorum, the holy of holies, or the editorial department of the St. Nicholas, he shocked the gentle creatures and terrified the associate editors by exclaiming, "Any editor to whom I submit my manuscript has an undisputed right to delete anything to which he objects but"—and his

> brows knit as he cried—"God Almighty Himself has no right to put words in my mouth that I never used!" (*TIHOT* 176)

When it came to censoring, Twain understood the need for the occasional deletion, and he even appreciated such guidance, but he remained adamant that his wording should always remain his own.

As one would expect, the most influential censors in Twain's life were also his primary readers, William Dean Howells and Twain's wife, Olivia. Both Howells and Olivia sought to show readers the gentler genius of Twain that they felt the public generally overlooked. Olivia provided a feminine perspective that she hoped would enable her husband's works reach a more refined, genteel audience. Howells likewise sought to help Twain's work reach a more educated readership. Both of these "editors" had an influence on the quantity and intensity of Twain's published profanity. In Twain scholarship over the last century, scholars generally credited Howells with indispensable moral editing while criticizing Olivia for her overly prudish expurgation. However, in the last few decades, this trend has shifted.

Because Twain sought to emphasize the role of his wife's censorship in order to make her feel a part of his literary career and because he liked to joke with Howells about chaffing under her restrictive hand, critics tended to look contemptuously upon Olivia's role in his literary endeavors, for Twain himself teasingly claimed that "[Olivia] edited everything I wrote. And what is more—she not only edited my works, she edited *me*!" (qtd. in Henderson 74). Certainly, first-hand accounts verify that Olivia was active in censoring his manuscripts; yet these contemporary voices speak more to the constructive

nature of her influence rather than her exaggerated Grundyism. For example, Clara explains her mother's role in the following way:

> Every artist must share his work with some understanding comrade, receiving for inspiration both praise and blame. The healthy guide of constructive criticism is as necessary to an artist, however great he may be, as the nourishing administration of applause. And mother was able to fill both capacities. How often did my father express his gratitude to the marvelous fate that had given him such a companion, one who was as deeply absorbed in his work as he was himself! One who had a pure instinct for the correct balance of values in literature as well as in life, and one whose adverse criticism proved invariably to be a just criticism because her intuition—born of a large heart and mind—hit the target plumb in the center.
>
> "Do you know, Sue," I once heard Father say to my Aunt, "whenever I have failed to follow the advice of Livy to change this or that sentence or eliminate a page, I have always come to regret it, because in the end my better taste in thoughts and their expression rises up and says: 'You should have done as she said; she was right.' And never once can I remember wishing I had left something as I had originally written it after it had received the censure of her unfailing vision."
>
> "What would you do without her, Samuel?" Aunt Sue asked.
>
> "I don't know; nor do I know what my publishers would do without her." (MFMT 67-68)

As Clara explains, Olivia served Twain as both an adoring audience and a constructive critic in one, and the conversation she recalls between her father and her Aunt Sue reveals that Twain recognized and appreciated Olivia's role.

Echoing Clara's explanation, Katy Leary, too, comments on Olivia's role in censoring the profanity in Twain's writings:

> I guess everybody knows how Mrs. Clemens always edited all them stories of his. He used to bring every bit of his writing to her every night and lay it on a stand by her bed; and she always read it before she went to sleep; and whatever she cut out (swear words, she used to scratch sometimes), he'd write it over again—always acted as if he'd never said them swear words. He liked it—if she liked it—even if it did make him write a little more—what she scratched out. (235-236)

Leary points out that Twain's primary goal in allowing his wife to edit his manuscripts was not to evade her nagging about profanity in his manuscript, rather, she enjoyed helping him with his work, and so he enjoyed letting her enjoy herself—even if it did cause him an extra bit of work.

Susy Clemens also wrote about her mother's role in the censoring of Twain's manuscripts. In her childhood biography of her father (which was full of gloriously atrocious misspellings that have been retained here), she wrote:

> Ever since papa and mamma were married, papa has written his books and then taken them to mama in manuscript and she has expergated them. Papa read *Huckleberry Finn* to us in manuscript just before it came out, and then would leave parts of it with mama to expergate, while he

> went off up to the study to work, and sometimes Clara and I would be sitting with mamma while she was looking the manuscript over and I remember so well with what pangs of regret we used to see her turn down the leaves of the pages which meant some delightfully dreadful part must be scratched out. And I remember one part partickularly which was perfectly fascinating it was dreadful, that Clara and I used to delight in, and oh with what dispare we saw mamma turn down the leaf on which it was written, we thought the book would be almost spoiled without it. But after it was published we changed our minds. We gradually came to feel as mamma did. (*TIHOT* 148-149)

Although Susy reveals her innocent delight in the profane tidbits and her initial sadness at their removal, she eventually agreed with the decorum motivating her mother's censorship.

Perhaps the most telling of the firsthand accounts of the censorship Twain's manuscripts endured comes from William Dean Howells. He recalls:

> When Clemens began to write for [the *Atlantic Monthly*] he came willingly under its rules, for with all his willfulness there never was a more biddable man in things you could show him a reason for. He never made the least of that trouble which so abounds for the hapless editor from narrow-minded contributors. If you wish a thing changed, very good, he changed it; if you suggested that a word or a sentence or a paragraph had better be struck, very good, he struck it out. His proof sheets came back each a veritable "mush of concessions," as Emerson says. Now and then

> he would try a little stronger language than the *Atlantic* had stomach for, and once when I sent him back a proof I made him observe that I had left out the profanity. He wrote back: "Mrs. Clemens opened that proof, and lit into the room with danger in her eye. What profanity? You see, when I read the manuscript to her I skipped that." It was part of his joke to pretend a violence in that gentlest creature which the more amusingly realized the situation to their friends. (*TIHOT* 107)

As Howells reveals, the two men enjoyed joking about the "violent censorship" their mild-mannered wives imposed upon them.

Surprisingly, in spite of the accounts that point to Olivia as an imposing editorial figure, Twain's greatest censor was himself. Bernard DeVoto acknowledges, "I have come to believe that Mark himself was responsible for many of the euphemisms and avoidances" of profanity in *Huckleberry Finn* (*MT at Work* 85). Oftentimes, when Twain was gathering his letters and notes as source material for one of his works (especially his travel narratives), he often went back and struck through passages that contained foul language. Other times, Twain would simply soften offending words or phrases when he edited his manuscripts. Although he oftentimes had, as Ferguson phrases it, an "estimate of what would shock the public" before he ever took his manuscripts to Olivia (225), he nonetheless needed the input from his wife. James M. Cox perhaps best explains this relationship, saying "[Twain's] comic genius required such resistance [as Livy's] in order to achieve expression in the same way that Tom Sawyer required Aunt Polly's indulgent repression in order to create the dream of freedom" (140). Sydney Krause, in his essay "Olivia Clemens's 'Editing' Reviewed," analyzes in detail the revisions Olivia suggested

and the subsequent changes Twain made in his manuscript for *Following the Equator.* Taking this work to be paradigmatic of Olivia's other censoring suggestions, Krause concludes that Olivia was a sort of "plodding, pedestrian proofreader, and a rather erratic one, at that, who let go many more serious improprieties than she caught" (330). As Krause notes, her "feared editorial restraint was—all things considered—quite negligible," and on his own, Twain "modified many more passages to avoid minor improprieties than those Livy had specifically wanted modified" (340-341).

Despite his own wild-west mannerisms, Twain was consistently aware of the disparity between his acceptance of profanity and the general public's attitude on the matter, and in this sense, he was his own greatest censor. In his *Autobiography* (2010), Twain recounts the uneasiness that the coarse language in his manuscripts caused when he went to send his works to the publishers. Twain explains:

> One may publish a book & print whatever his family shall approve & allow to pass, but it is the Public that edit a Magazine, & so by the sheer necessities of the case a magazine's liberties are rather limited. For instance: a few days ago I wrote Chapter XIV—"My Debut as a Literary Person"—my wife edited it, approved it (with enthusiasm—this is unusual), & said send it to you & retire the "Platonic Sweetheart." It was a good idea, & I said I would. But on my way to the village postoffice with it I remembered that it contained a sentence of nine words which you would have to drive a blue pencil through—so that blocked that scheme. (15)

Although Olivia had approved the text, Twain was so concerned with the public's acceptance of his language that he decided against publishing the sketch.

While Twain was responsible for the bulk of the scrutiny over the profanity in his works, William Dean Howells also guided Twain's use of profanity. When "Old Times on the Mississippi" began running in the *Atlantic* in January of 1875, Howells helped Twain vet his manuscript for a more discerning readership. As Ron Powers explains, "Howells could get starchy on one issue: profanity" (368). Exactly one "hell" was printed before Howells imposed a stricter censorship on Twain's writing. Powers notes that Howells "had plenty of backup" with this decision, "his wife Elinor, Olivia Clemens, and just about everybody else in New England, with Mother Fairbanks standing by in Cleveland as a final reinforcement" (368). In order to ingratiate himself with the New England literati, Twain relied heavily on Howells's respectability, and he was happy to make any cut that Howells required. As he wrote in a cover letter to the first installment of "Old Times on the Mississippi," Twain was happy to have Howells "cut it, scarify it, reject it—handle it with entire freedom" (qtd. in Powers 368).

Although Twain carefully regulated the profanity in his printed works, trying to ensure that he wouldn't disenfranchise his readers, he often gave the profanity *caused* by his writing full swing. Frustrated by the trouble of writing his manuscripts by hand, Twain experimented with a number of methods to bypass this slow, tedious process, and many of these experiments ended with profane outbursts. Convinced that there was a better method to compose his manuscripts than writing by hand, Twain turned to Edison's new invention, the phonograph, and after a bout of rheumatism in 1891, experimented with a phonograph as he worked on *The American Claimant*.

Unfortunately, the machine, while technically satisfactory, left Twain longing for a human audience. He explains:

> You can't write literature with it, because it hasn't any ideas & it hasn't any gift for elaboration, or smartness of talk, or vigor of action, or felicity of expression, but is just matter-of-fact, compressive, unornamental, & as grave & unsmiling as the devil. I filled four dozen cylinders in two sittings, then found I could have said about as much with the pen & said it a deal better. Then I resigned. I believe it could teach one to dictate literature to a phonographer—& some time I will experiment in that line (qtd. in *Auto2* 20)

Twain's experiments with the machine, however, were not as dispassionate as his explanation suggests. He found dictating to the machine to be so cumbersome that he said, "I not only curse and swear all the time I am dictating, but [I] am impatient and dissatisfied because God has given me only one tongue to curse and swear with" (qtd. in Powers 535).

When the phonograph proved unsuccessful for his writing, Twain employed the services of a stenographer who would take dictations of his stories and then type up this material into manuscript form. Josephine Hobby, his first stenographer, was hired in 1906. While such dictations relieved Twain of the stress of handwriting and provided him with an appreciative audience to encourage his storytelling, he found the inconsistencies in spelling and the inaccuracies in the copy to be infuriating. As the typed pages often backlogged by the hundreds before Twain reviewed them, he would frequently encounter the same repetitive, maddening error numerous times before he could talk to Hobby about

correcting it. In her journal, Lyon recalls Twain's frustration over such mistakes. She writes:

> Day after day Mr. Clemens is harassed and tormented when he is reading the dictated matter by continually coming across Hobby's blunders, & the worst one—the most exasperating one is where she invariably corrects Mr. Clemens, writing "one thousand" or "one hundred," where he has said "a thousand", or "a hundred." Today it passed the limit of his endurance. Through his tightly shut teeth he damned that "hell-fired word" until he was tired; & then he went for "that idiot!"—"that devilish woman! I'd like some one to take her out & have her scalped and gutted!" (qtd. in *Auto2* 28-29)

As it turned out Twain, corrected over two dozen instances of this annoying error in that one sitting. Unfortunately, using a stenographer was not as effortless as he would have hoped, and it appears to have caused its own fair share of swearing.

Still seeking a better solution to replace handwriting for composition, Twain turned to the typewriter. Originally excited about the new Remington typewriter, Twain quickly discovered the sheer volume of profanity resulting from its use. Paine explains:

> The new enthusiasm ran its course and died. Three months later, when the Remington makers wrote him for a recommendation of the machine, he replied that he had entirely stopped using it. The typewriter was not perfect in those days, and the keys did not always respond readily. He declared it was ruining his morals—that it made him "*want* to swear." He offered it to Howells because, he said, Howells had no morals anyway.

> Howells hesitated, so Clemens traded the machine to Bliss for a side-saddle. But perhaps Bliss also became afraid of its influence, for in due time he brought it back. Howells, again tempted, hesitated, and this time was lost. What eventually became of the machine is not history. (Paine 536)

In his typical fashion, Twain switched his penchant for profanity onto Howells, claiming that perhaps the most refined and principled of his friends is the one with "no morals" and therefore wouldn't mind the temptation to swear, which the machine would doubtlessly provide.

Even dictating and giving interviews from his bedroom, which after the death of his wife had gradually evolved into an informal study and parlor, provided Twain with motives to swear. Oftentimes, he would dictate his manuscripts from his oversized Italian bed or give interviews while lounging around in his nightgown, and in such a casual atmosphere he often lost small scraps of paper, causing a volcanic eruption of profanity. Clara recalls:

> Although Father loved the great Italian bed with a cherub on each post, in which he had slept for many years, he sometimes complained that it was too large. Once, when he was lying in it, dictating to the stenographer, he wanted to quote from a newspaper notice, but hunted and hunted in vain among numerable papers lying on the bed. He got madder and madder. Finally he asked the stenographer to leave the room so that he might swear. Mr. Paine helped Father search for that clipping, which could not be found. Father muttered angrily with interspersed profanity: "One could

> lose a dog in this bed!" Finally Mr. Paine suggested that possibly the clipping in his hand was the one he wanted, and so it was proven to be. This was too much for a saint to bear. Father went into geysers of profanity and then remarked: "There ought to be a room in this house to swear in. It's dangerous to have to repress an emotion like that." (*MFMT* 259-260)

Excusing the female stenographer so that he might have a more appreciative and appropriate masculine audience to which to swear, Twain lamented that houses had no insulated room specifically designed for profanity.

In *Following the Equator*, Twain, with perhaps a sense of self-vindication in regards to his profanity, speaks to what Krause calls "the ineluctable addiction of all men to irreverence" (347). One can imagine the profane Twain, thinking of his own colorful use of language when he writes:

> We are always canting about people's "irreverence," always charging this offense upon somebody or other, and thereby intimating that we are better than that person and do not commit that offense ourselves. Whenever we do this we are in a lying attitude, and our speech is cant; for none of us are reverent—in a meritorious way; deep down in our hearts we are all irreverent. There is probably not a single exception to this rule in the earth. There is probably not one person whose reverence rises higher than respect for his *own* sacred things; and therefore, it is not a thing to boast about and be proud of, since the most degraded savage has that— and, like the best of us, has nothing higher. To speak plainly, we despise all

> reverences and all objects of reverence which are outside the pale of our own list of sacred things. And yet, with strange inconsistency, we are shocked when other people despise and defile the things which are holy to us. (514-515)

In light of the censorship with which he dealt, both personally and professionally, there can be little doubt that Twain begrudged the hypocritical nature of people's umbrage with his language.

CHAPTER VIII

Artistic Profanity

Words are powerful. In addition to their ability to define and transmit the human experience, words also have the power of their own sounds, the tripping cadence of pronunciation, the quiet rhythmic qualities of stressed and unstressed syllables, and the roll of energy they build when they are passionately strung together. For Mark Twain, the right words could stir up both an emotional and a physical reaction in the mind and body of the listener; their beauty went beyond transmission of meaning and settled in the auditory realm of the sublime. When writing about the qualities of good literature, Twain revels in the pleasure of "verbal exactness." Twain's ecstasy over words and their ability to stir the soul is unquestionable; he writes:

> A powerful agent is the right word: it lights the reader's way and makes it plain; a close approximation to it will answer, and much traveling is done in a well-enough fashion by its help, but we do not welcome it and applaud it and rejoice in it as we do when THE right one blazes out on us. Whenever we come upon one of those intensely right words in a book or a newspaper the resulting effect is physical as well as spiritual, and electrically prompt: it tingles exquisitely around through the walls of the mouth and tastes as tart and crisp and good as the autumn-butter that creams the sumac-berry. One has no time to examine the word and vote upon its rank and standing, the automatic recognition of its supremacy is so immediate. (*Tales* 397-398)

Words, as Mark Twain writes, have value in their aptness, and this value returns both cognitive and physical stimuli. There is a "tingle" in one's mouth, and the words take on taste and body as they pass through the speaker's lips. The immediacy of a powerfully "right" expression is undeniable; Twain argues that we, as audience members, experience an "automatic" realization of the value and perfection of the right word.

Because the right words ring true not only for their meaning and application in context but also for their sound and energy, sometimes the "right words" are not always innocuous or polite. Profanity, with its energetic cadence and crescendo, has the ability to elicit the same automatic appreciation one has for the aptness of the "right word." Thus, there are times when social codes of morality and "respectable" expression have no ability to prevent the reflexive appreciation of profane words because profanity's poetic construction appeals to man's instinctive appreciation of artful language. The right word is the right word, regardless of whether it is profane, and one instantly knows a word's rightness when one hears or speaks it.

According to Twain, profanity that exhibits the poetic qualities of language, the aptness which stimulates an undeniable pleasure, is in fact a "great art" (*MTPLetters* 24 April 1904). In a speech in December of 1905, Twain recalled a visit to a village in the suburb of New Bedford during which he and a friend witnessed "profanity of the most exquisite kind" (*Speeches* 292). Twain rhapsodized, "You never heard such accomplished profanity. I never heard it also delivered with such eloquence. I never enjoyed profanity as I enjoyed it then" (292). A master of the art himself, Twain appreciated the artistry involved in a speaker knowing that sometimes the "right word" was a profane one. When it was well-constructed and well-spoken, profanity inspired in the listeners awe and

wonder, leaving them with a sense of reverence and respect for the speaker. Profanity could be magnificent. One such illustration of artful profanity occurs in "The Captain's Story," where Twain discusses Captain "Hurricane" Jones and his unconventional language that was a joy to the ear and a pleasure to the soul. Twain writes:

> One trip the captain had a clergyman on board, but did not know he was a clergyman, since the passenger list did not betray the fact. He took a great liking to this Rev. Mr. Peters, and talked with him a great deal: told him yarns, gave him toothsome scraps of personal history, and wove a glittering streak of profanity through his garrulous fabric that was refreshing to a spirit weary of the dull neutralities of undecorated speech. (*SRNIE* 14-15)

In the narration of the story, Twain emphasizes the attractively mesmerizing quality of the Captain's language with the adjective "glittering." Unlike the "dull neutralities of undecorated speech," the profanity exhibits a beautiful appropriateness that the listener seems to instantly appreciate. And, as with Twain's discussion of the "right word," the Captain's profanity has both a physical and spiritual effect on the audience; the narrator acknowledges that there is a "refreshing" quality to the language, and he seems to feel it tingle through him.

Part of the beauty of artful profanity lay in speakers' methods of oration. While working at the *Buffalo Express* in 1869, Twain published an editorial entitled "Rev. H. W. Beecher: His Private Habits" in which he elaborates upon the appeal of profanity. As Harold Bush, Jr. explains, Twain was "known to share a deep admiration for Beecher's oratorical style" (106).[1] Although in his article Twain asserts that Beecher never used

profanity, Twain is so impressed by the energetic and masterful oration of Beecher's sermons that he discusses the skill such a speaker could hypothetically have in handling the profane:

> Mr. Beecher never swears. In all his life a profane expression has never passed his lips. But if he were to take it into his head to try it once, he would make even that disgusting habit seem beautiful—he would handle it as it was never handled before, and if there was a wholesome moral lesson hidden away in it anywhere, he would ferret it out and use it with tremendous effect. Panoplied with his grand endowments—his judgment, his discriminating taste, his felicity of expression, his graceful fancy—if Mr. Beecher had a mind to swear, he would throw into it an amount of poetry, and pathos, and splendid imagery, and moving earnestness, and resistless energy, topped off and climaxed with gorgeous pyrotechnic conflagration of filigree and fancy swearing, that would astonish and delight the hearer and forever after quiver through his bewildered memory an exquisite confusion of rainbows and music, and thunder and lightning. A man of a high order of intellect and appreciation could sit and listen to Mr. Beecher swear for a week without getting tired. (*BE* 56-57)

Regardless of his initial labeling of profanity as a "disgusting habit," Twain is unable to conceal his passion about the lyrical attributes of well-constructed profanity. When passing through the lips of an accomplished speaker, profanity can contain an "amount of poetry" with undulating sounds and regular rhythms. It can contain "pathos," instantly drawing the listener in with its powerful emotion and inciting automatic empathy. Within

profanity one can find "splendid imagery and moving earnestness" that at once conjures worlds of imagination that are so real one could almost touch them. The words would be spoken with such "resistless energy" that the passion and enthusiasm of the speaker would gradually infects the listener until both were excited, perhaps even frenzied, by the energy of the language. Above all, Twain celebrates the dichotomy of profanity; like the Romantics and their appreciation of the sublime, Twain finds in profanity both delicate beauty and frightful, awe-inspiring power. In this sense profanity is an "exquisite confusion of rainbows and music, and thunder and lightning." It is this dangerous beauty that proves so alluring.

For Twain, there was palpable enjoyment to be had when a master of profanity was speaking. In his autobiographical notes, Twain remembers an encounter he and the Reverend Joe Twichell had with some seemingly taciturn townsfolk who later demonstrated great ability with profanity. One November day in 1874, Twain and Twichell decided to walk from their homes in Hartford to Boston, a distance of over one hundred miles, as a sort of publicity stunt. A former college athlete, Twichell easily walked the twenty-eight miles that constituted the first leg of their journey; however, after a long day's walk, Twain suffered achey legs and "skinned heels," and the two stayed over at a local hotel in the village of Westford. While in the lobby with the townsfolk that evening, Twichell began to chat with a man he later described as "a sublimely profane hostler whom you couldn't jostle with any sort of mild remark without bringing down upon yourself a perfect avalanche of oaths" (qtd. in Paine 528). Twain recounts the following:

He [Twichell] had observed signs and smelt smells which suggested that although these men seemed so dumb and dead, the one tilted against the wall might possibly be coaxed into a state of semi-interest by some references to horses:—an ostler, the Reverend guessed, and he was right, as transpired later. So he said, "Well, Ostler, I suppose you raise some pretty fine breeds of horses around here?"

The young fellow unbent right away; and his face, which was a good face, lighted pleasantly, eagerly in fact. He untilted, planted his feet on the floor, shoved his coon tail around to the rear, spread his broad hands upon his knees, beamed up at the tall Reverend, and turned himself loose:

"Well, now, I tell *you*!—*pretty* fine ain't the word!—and it don't *begin*!"

Evidently he was as good-hearted a young fellow as ever was, and as guiltless of wish or intent to offend; yet into the chance chinks of that single little short sentence he managed to wattle as much as two yards and a half of the most varied and wonderful profanity! And that sentence did not end his speech—no, it was the mere introduction; straight after it followed the speech—a speech five minutes long, full of enthusiastic horse statistics; poured out with the most fluent facility, as from an inexhaustible crater, and all ablaze from beginning to end with crimson lava jets of desolating and utterly unconscious profanity! It was his native tongue; he had no idea that there was any harm in it.

When the speech ended there was a mighty silence; the Reverend was in a state of stupefaction—dumb, he was, for once. The situation was unique, delicious. The bliss which I had been feeling before was tame to what I was feeling now. Skinned heels were nothing; I could have enjoyed this thing if I had been skinned all over. I did not laugh exteriorly, for that would be indecorous. I made no motion, gave no sign; simply sat still and slowly died with joy. The Reverend looked at me appealingly, as much to say "Don't desert a friend in heavy trouble—help me out of this." I did nothing—was too near dissolution to be useful—and the ostler turned himself loose once more—once more he oozed eloquent profanity and incredible smut from every pore; and all so naturally and sweetly and innocently that it would have been flattery to call it a sin.

In desperation the Reverend broke in with a question about some other matter—mild, commonplace, less exciting than horse affairs; something about the roads and distances thence to Boston; hoped and believed that this cold topic would furnish no chances for lurid language. A mistake; the ostler sailed into that subject, rained, hailed, blew great guns and thundered and lightened over it, under it, around it and through it, with all the profane splendor which had distinguished his horse talk.

The Reverend rushed to the front again, pulled the ostler loose from the roads and got him to tackle the crops. Another failure. He went into the crops with as fresh a zeal as ever and drove his dialect night cart through it at as rattling a gait and with as fragrant an effect as in the

beginning. In a sort of pathetic despair the Reverend fled, as a refuge, to the ancient bummer at the stove and uncorked him with the most innocuous remark, a colorless and unincendiary remark, about my lame and sore condition; whereupon the bummer, a pitying and kindly creature, turned *himself* loose with a perfectly Vesuvian eruption of charitable dirt and blasphemy concerning the healing properties of "Karosine" externally applied; appealed to the ostler to confirm the almost miraculous excellence of Karosine for bruises and abrasions; the ostler responded with metaphoric enthusiasm; and for five minutes the Reverend stood speechless there while the unutterable tides from those two swept over him.

At last a saving thought slipped into his brain. He sauntered to the counter, got a letter out of his pocket, glanced through it, returned it to its envelope, laid it on the counter, ciphered aimlessly upon it with a pencil; then presently sauntered away and left it there with a sinful pretense of having forgotten it. There was a pale joy in his jaded eye when he saw the bait take; saw the ostler loaf toward the counter; saw him take up the envelope and drop his eye on it. There was a pause, and silence! Then the ostler broke out with glad surprise:

"What!—you are a preacher?"

(Prodigious and long-continued thunderpeal of improprieties and profanities), "Why didn't you *tell* a body so! *I* didn't know you was anybody!"

> And straightway he flew around with alacrity, routed the cook out of bed, chambermaid likewise, and in two minutes these people were hard at work in our behalf. Then the delightful and delighted orator seated the Reverend in the place of honor and told him all about the state of church matters in Duffield: a flowing, masterly, good-hearted, right-purposed narrative which was fifteen minutes passing a given point, and was torch-lighted with indelicacies from end to end, which flickered lambent through a misty red hell of profanity rent and torn at four-foot intervals all down the line by sky-cleaving rocket explosions of gorgeous blasphemy! Admirable artist!—all his previous efforts were but lightning-bug-and-glowworm displays compared to this final and supreme conflagration!
>
> As we turned in, in a double-bedded room, the Reverend remarked, with subdued gratefulness,
>
> "Well, as to this thing, there is one comfort—such as it is: you can't *print* it, Mark." (*Auto1* 283-286)

Aside from his obvious delight in the irony of the situation, Twain is enraptured by the ostler's language in and of itself. According to Twain, this "wonderful profanity" that is "poured out with the most fluent facility" is "gorgeous blasphemy." The young man, who is innocent and "guiltless of wish or intent to offend," is a master in one of Twain's most admired art forms, and Twain suggests that such profanity is the ostler's "native tongue." Twain falls into ecstasies and uses admiring nouns and adjectives to ascribe value to the man's profanity. In addition to calling it "gorgeous" and "wonderful," Twain appraises the profanity by using the words "splendor," "eloquent," and "incredible." In the end,

Twain cannot help but conclude that the ostler's fine poetic command of profanity makes him an "admirable artist."

It is worthwhile noting that although part of humor in the above anecdote revolves around Twichell being abashed in the face of such obscene and profane language, Twain perhaps exaggerates Twichell's reaction for comedic effect. In truth, Twichell, though not known to use the language himself, was likely familiar with such crude language, not only from his relationship with Twain, who was notorious for his profanity, but also from his service in the Civil War. Even though Twichell was enlisted as a chaplain, he intermittently acted as a battlefield nurse, witnessing firsthand some of the most bloody and harrowing engagements of the war and no doubt becoming familiar with the most heartfelt of military profanity.[2] Although he preferred not to witness a Vesuvius of profanity, Twichell was known to appreciate such language in its own right. As Ron Powers explains, Twichell's "theology was less intellectual than emotional. Wagging a finger at commonplace sin mattered less to him than exalting life, and a faith centered on good works" (252). In a letter to William Lyon Phelps, Twain recounts another incident where Twichell was at the receiving end of some artful profanity:

> Joe was passing under a fictitious name, and old Wakeman didn't suspect that he was a parson; so he gave his profanity full swing, and he was a master of that great art. You probably know Twichell, and will know that that is a kind of refreshment which he is very capable of enjoying. (*MTPLetters* 24 April 1904)

Twain's comment is perhaps tongue-in-cheek, yet it likely touches on a fragment of underlying truth. Twichell, in spite of his remonstrations, understood (if not concurred with) the poetry of profanity.

Sometimes, the most beautiful and interesting profanity Twain encountered was the most unconventional. For example, in his autobiographical notes, Twain writes of an "old mate" from his time on the river whose profanity was particularly engaging because of the energy its bizarre vocabulary created:

> That old mate, Davis, was a very interesting man....Being a chief mate he was a prodigious and competent swearer, a thing which the office required. But he had an auxiliary vocabulary which no other mate on the river possessed and it made him able to persuade indolent roustabouts more effectively than did the swearing of any other mate in the business because while it was not profane, it was of so mysterious and formidable and terrifying a nature that it sounded five or six times as profane as any language to be found on the fo'castle anywhere in the river service.
>
> Davis had no education beyond reading and something that so nearly resembled writing that it was reasonably well calculated to deceive. He read, and he read a great deal, and diligently, but his whole library consisted of a single book. It was Lyell's Geology, and he had stuck to it until all its grim and rugged scientific terminology was familiar in his mouth, though he hadn't the least idea of what the words meant, and didn't care what they meant. All he wanted out of those great words was the energy that they stirred up in his roustabouts. In times of extreme

> emergency he would let fly a volcanic irruption of the old regular orthodox profanity mixed up and seasoned all through with his imposing geological terms, then formally charge his roustabouts with being Old Silurian Invertebrates out of the Incandescent Anisodactylous Post-Pliocene Period, and damn the whole gang in a body to perdition. (*Auto1* 108-109)

Although Davis utilized the "old regular orthodox profanity" that was characteristic of most swearing, it was his ingenuity with the geological terms that set him apart from the other foul-mouthed river men. While these geological terms were not technically profane, the sounds of the unfamiliar words, combined with the bombastic delivery, resulted in so "mysterious and formidable and terrifying a nature that it sounded five or six times as profane" as any other profanity. In this sketch, Twain rejoices in the art of skillful profanity wherein the speaker's energy and spirit ultimately elevate his language to the sublime.

Finding the spirit of profanity in the most unusual or mundane words delighted Twain, and he freely shared that delight with those around him. One evening in December of 1893, Mark Twain gave a speech at a dinner honoring his fellow writer, Brander Matthews. In his speech, Twain expounds upon the hidden profanity in something as simple as a name. Of Brander Matthews, Twain says,

> You have spoken of him well, and lovingly and heartily and given him the praises which he has earned and which are his right. But you have overlooked what I think is the most notable achievement of his career—namely, that he has reconciled us to the sound of his sombre and awful

> name—namely—Brander Matthews! his blighting and scathing name—Brand-er Matthews! his lurid and desolating name—BRAND-er MATH-thews! B-r-r-r-an-der Math-thews! makes you think of an imprisoned god of the Underworld muttering imprecations and maledictions. B-r-a-n-d-e-r—it sounds like the mutterings of imprisoned fiends in hell! B-r-ran-der Math-thews! It is full of rumblings and thundering and rebellions and blasphemies. B-r-ran-der Math-thews! The first time you hear it you shrivel up and shudder and you say to yourself that a person has no business using that kind of language when children are present. B-r-a-n-d-e-r—why, it was months after I knew him before I dared to breathe his name on the Sabbath day! It is a searching and soul-stirring sound and makes the most abandoned person resolve to lead a better life. And on the other hand when the veteran profane swearer finds all his ammunition damp and ineffectual from long exposure, how fresh and welcome is the dynamite in that name—B-r-r-RANder M-m-ATHthews! You can curse a man's head off with that name if you know how and where to put the emphasis." (*Speaking* 269-270)

Incredibly, Twain turns an ordinary name into a swear word simply by adding the right emphasis and using the right energy. Even his audience seemed amazed by the transformation. Twain noted that "Gilder and the others said, 'We never noticed what a swearing name it is, but it is.' And Matthews said: 'They all tell me they will never hear my name again without associating it with profanity'" (qtd. in *MFMT* 134). The style of oration with which Twain speaks elevates a simple name to the realm of the profane.

Once again, Twain illustrates the art in knowing how and with what words one can skillfully swear.

Not only did Twain delight in names of people that could be profane, but he also enjoyed a good laugh when the names of places could receive such elevation as well. In his *Autobiography* (2010), Twain tells of a afternoon lunch in the spring of 1906 in which the name of an English parish that was being discussed proved especially profane. He writes:

> At a large luncheon party at Lord Houghton's we met Sir Arthur Helps, who was a celebrity of world-wide fame at the time, but is quite forgotten now. Lord Elcho, a large vigorous man, sat at some distance down the table. He was talking earnestly about Godalming. It was a deep and flowing and unarticulated rumble, but I got the Godalming pretty clearly every time it broke free of the rumble, and as all the strength was on the first end of the word it startled me every time, because it sounded so like swearing. In the middle of the luncheon Lady Houghton rose, remarked to the guests on her right and on her left in a matter-of-fact way, "Excuse me, I have an engagement," and without further ceremony she went off to meet it. This would have been doubtful etiquette in America. (434)

There can be little doubt that Lady Houghton, shocked by the "profanity" of Godalming, excused herself in favor of more pious company.

In *Life on the Mississippi,* Twain recalls another instance in which the beauty of the speaker's energy, and thus the true art of his profanity, resides more in the energy and

passion of the speaker's words than in the words themselves. Recounting his days as an overconfident cub pilot, Twain writes:

> One day we were approaching New Madrid, bound down and heavily laden. Brown was at one side of the wheel, steering; I was at the other, standing by to "pull down" or "shove up." He cast a furtive glance at me every now and then. I had long ago learned what that meant; viz., he was trying to invent a trap for me. I wondered what shape it was going to take. By and by he stepped back from the wheel and said in his usual snarly way—
>
> "Here!—See if you've got gumption enough to round her to."
>
> This was simply BOUND to be a success; nothing could prevent it; for he had never allowed me to round the boat to before; consequently, no matter how I might do the thing, he could find free fault with it. He stood back there with his greedy eye on me, and the result was what might have been foreseen: I lost my head in a quarter of a minute, and didn't know what I was about; I started too early to bring the boat around, but detected a green gleam of joy in Brown's eye, and corrected my mistake; I started around once more while too high up, but corrected myself again in time; I made other false moves, and still managed to save myself; but at last I grew so confused and anxious that I tumbled into the very worst blunder of all—I got too far down before beginning to fetch the boat around. Brown's chance was come.

> His face turned red with passion; he made one bound, hurled me across the house with a sweep of his arm, spun the wheel down, and began to pour out a stream of vituperation upon me which lasted till he was out of breath. In the course of this speech he called me all the different kinds of hard names he could think of, and once or twice I thought he was even going to swear—but he didn't this time. "Dod dern" was the nearest he ventured to the luxury of swearing, for he had been brought up with a wholesome respect for future fire and brimstone. (*LOM* 169-170)

Once again, the spirit of the words elevates their effect to the artfully profane. Although Brown never uses a technically profane word, the passion and energy with which he delivers the "hard names" are enough to convince Twain that he is being cussed out. There can be little doubt that the "stream of vituperation," the sustained burning and bitter criticism that pours forth from Brown, carries the same undeniable condemnation as the traditional "god damn you."

Throughout his life, this "spirit of profanity" intrigued Twain, for the most unexpected speakers could elevate the innocuous to the profane in the most delicious of manners. Twain believed that "The spirit of wrath—not the words—is the sin; and the spirit of wrath is cursing. We begin to swear before we can talk" (qtd. in Zall 73). Just as the spirit and energy that the geological terms brought to Davis' profanity elevated it to the sublime, so too can the spirit of wrath elevate the mildest adjective to the profane. One such example of the spirit of wrath at work is found in Twain's autobiographical notes. Twain recalls a "pleasant memory" when his beloved wife Livy uttered a distinctly profane phrase:

I am dwelling upon Atwater just for love. I have nothing important to say about Atwater—in fact only one thing to say about him at all. And even that one thing I could leave unmentioned if I wanted to—but I don't want to. It has been a pleasant memory to me for a whole generation. It lets in a fleeting ray of light upon Livy's gentle and calm and equable spirit. Although she could feel strongly and utter her feelings strongly, none but a person familiar with her and with all her moods would ever be able to tell by her language that that language was violent. Young Charley [Livy's brother] had many and many a time tried to lodge a seed of unkindness against Atwater in Livy's heart, but she was as steadfast in her fidelity as was her father, and Charley's efforts always failed. Many and many a time he brought to her a charge against Atwater which he believed would bring the longed-for bitter word, and at last he scored a success—for "all things come to him who waits."

I was away at the time, but Charley could not wait for me to get back. He was too glad, too eager. He sat down at once and wrote to me while his triumph was fresh and his happiness hot and contenting. He told me how he had laid the whole exasperating matter before Livy and then had asked her "*Now* what do you say?" And she said "*Damn* Atwater."

Charley knew that there was no need to explain this to me. He knew I would perfectly understand. He knew that I would know that he was not quoting, but was *translating*. He knew that I would know that his translation was exact, was perfect, that it conveyed the precise length,

> breadth, weight, meaning and force of the words which Livy had really used. He knew that I would know that the phrase which she really uttered was "I disapprove of Atwater."
>
> He was quite right. In her mouth that word "disapprove" was as blighting and withering and devastating as another person's damn. (*Auto2* 374)

Twain immediately responded to Charley's letter with the following note on March 19, 1875:

> Livy, after reading your letter, used her severest form of expression about Mr. Atwater—to-wit: She did not "approve" of his conduct. This made me shudder; for it was equivalent to Allie Spaulding's saying "Mr. Atwater is a mean thing;" or Rev. Thomas Beecher's saying "Damn that Atwater," or my saying "I wish Atwater was three hundred million miles in——!" (*MTL6* 420)

These anecdotes illustrate that even words such as "disapprove," which are mild when placed beside the acerbic language one often associates with profanity, can achieve the same effect as profanity when they are spoken with the right emphasis, energy, and emotion.

When the spirit of wrath is strong, sometimes words are not even necessary for profanity; occasionally an inarticulate grunt or groan can carry the same meaning as the most stringent profanity. For example, in a letter to his friend, Twain writes about Livy's "underhanded swearing":

> When Mrs. Clemens read about your being so "many promises deep," she made that noise which one creates by suddenly detaching the tongue from the roof of the mouth, & which eloquently expresses aggravation. That did not deceive the Recording Angel a bit; I knew the entry that was being set down in the great book opposite the name Livy L. Clemens, to-wit: "March 24, 1880—at breakfast—unarticulated remark reflecting the thought, 'Damn those Warners.'"
>
> To get this woman to give up the baneful habit of underhanded swearing, is one of those things which I have long ago been obliged to give up, as being among the reforms which cannot be accomplished. But the poor children don't suspect, I thank God for that.
>
> What she said afterward, (shot full of silent oaths & curses & general blasphemy which made my flesh crawl & my hair stand,) was this:
>
> "That is an old debt, & I suppose one must allow that it is just to pay it—though it does seem unfair, somehow—but why have the Warners allowed it to run so long?—here we have been away a year & a half; they have had abundance of time to collect—it does seem to me right down hard; I believe such indebtednesses should come under some sort of law of limitation, like moneyed ones." (*MTPLetters* 24 March 1880)

Although Livy never uses any swear words, the spirit of wrath transforms her charmingly mild commentary into the vilest of profanity that, tongue in cheek, makes Twain's "flesh crawl" and "hair stand" on end. Perhaps the extreme obvious lack of profanity (or any biting words at all) is what makes her statement that much more humorous and that much

more subversive. Thus, part of the allure of profanity lies in its extreme variation, for one seems to be able to swear with any word when the spirit of wrath is channeled directly into verbal expression.

Although profanity at times could inspire awe and wonder, when profanity was ill-conceived and ill-delivered, it was more than awkward; it was painful to the ear and the soul alike. If a man could not swear well, Twain thought, then he ought to not swear at all since his ineptitude undermined any bravado he had attempted to achieve by using profanity. When Twain describes a particular night watchmen who was unable to curse with proficiency, he explains that the man's "grammar was bad, his construction worse, and his profanity so void of art that it was an element of weakness rather than strength in his conversation" (*LOM* 42). Sometimes even the most proficient swearer could fall into bad form. In *Roughing It*, Twain tells of Captain Nye, an old gentleman who could "fill up the odd chinks with the most elaborate profanity that strong convictions and a fine fancy could contrive. With fair opportunity he could swear very well and handle his adjectives with considerable judgment" (280). Yet when the Captain was struck with a particularly painful spasm of rheumatism, Twain recalls that his profanity suffered greatly and that "it was painful to listen to him, he was so awkward" (280).

According to Twain, bad profanity was not bad simply because of the words or their arrangement. Even the best swear words, if they did not carry the proper tone or energy, could fall flat and useless. Twain recalls a time when his wife Livy was attempting to teach him a lesson about not using profanity:

> All through the first ten years of my married life I kept a constant and discreet watch upon my tongue while in the house, and went outside and

to a distance when circumstances were too much for me and I was obliged to seek relief. I prized my wife's respect and approval above all the rest of the human race's respect and approval. I dreaded the day when she should discover that I was but a whited sepulcher partly freighted with suppressed language. I was so careful, during ten years, that I had not a doubt that my suppressions had been successful. Therefore I was quite as happy in my guilt as I could have been if I had been innocent.

But at last an accident exposed me. I went into the bath-room one morning to make my toilet, and carelessly left the door two or three inches ajar. It was the first time that I had ever failed to take the precaution of closing it tightly. I knew the necessity of being particular about this, because shaving was always a trying ordeal for me, and I could seldom carry it through to a finish without verbal helps. Now this time I was unprotected, but did not suspect it. I had no extraordinary trouble with my razor on this occasion, and was able to worry through with mere mutterings and growlings of an improper sort, but with nothing noisy or emphatic about them—no snapping and barking. Then I put on a shirt. My shirts are an invention of my own. They open in the back, and are buttoned there—when there are buttons. This time the button was missing. My temper jumped up several degrees in a moment, and my remarks rose accordingly, both in loudness and vigor of expression. But I was not troubled, for the bath-room door was a solid one and I supposed it was firmly closed. I flung up the window and threw the shirt out. It fell upon

the shrubbery where the people on their way to church could admire it if they wanted to; there was merely fifty feet of grass between the shirt and the passer-by. Still rumbling and thundering distantly, I put on another shirt. Again the button was absent. I augmented my language to meet the emergency, and threw that shirt out of the window. I was too angry—too insane—to examine the third shirt, but put it furiously on. Again the button was absent, and that shirt followed its comrades out of the window. Then I straightened up, gathered my reserves, and let myself go like a cavalry charge. In the midst of that great assault, my eye fell upon that gaping door, and I was paralysed.

It took me a good while to finish my toilet. I extended the time unnecessarily in trying to make up my mind as to what I would best do in the circumstances. I tried to hope that Mrs. Clemens was asleep, but I knew better. I could not escape by the window. It was narrow, and suited only to shirts. At last I made up my mind to boldly loaf through the bedroom with the air of a person who had not been doing anything. I made half the journey successfully. I did not turn my eyes in her direction, because that would not be safe. It is very difficult to look as if you have not been doing anything when the facts are the other way, and my confidence in my performance oozed steadily out of me as I went along. I was aiming for the left-hand door because it was furthest from my wife. It had never been opened from the day that the house was built, but it seemed a blessed refuge for me now. The bed was this one, wherein I am

lying now, and dictating these histories morning after morning with so much serenity. It was this same old elaborately carved black Venetian bedstead—the most comfortable bedstead that ever was, with space enough in it for a family, and carved angels enough surmounting its twisted columns and its headboard and footboard to bring peace to the sleepers, and pleasant dreams. I had to stop in the middle of the room. I hadn't the strength to go on. I believed that I was under accusing eyes—that even the carved angels were inspecting me with an unfriendly gaze. You know how it is when you are convinced that somebody behind you is looking steadily at you. You have to turn your face—you can't help it. I turned mine. The bed was placed as it is now, with the foot where the head ought to be. If it had been placed as it should have been, the high headboard would have sheltered me. But the footboard was no sufficient protection, for I could be seen over it. I was exposed. I was wholly without protection. I turned, because I couldn't help it—and my memory of what I saw is still vivid, after all these years.

Against the white pillows I saw the black head—I saw that young and beautiful face; and I saw the gracious eyes with a something in them which I had never seen there before. They were snapping and flashing with indignation. I felt myself crumbling; I felt myself shrinking away to nothing under that accusing gaze. I stood silent under that desolating fire for as much as a minute, I should say—it seemed a very, very long time. Then my wife's lips parted, and from them issued—my latest bath-room

> remark. The language perfect, but the expression velvety, unpractical, apprentice-like, ignorant, inexperienced, comically inadequate, absurdly weak and unsuited to the great language. In my lifetime I had never heard anything so out of tune, so inharmonious, so incongruous, so ill-suited to each other as were those mighty words set to that feeble music. I tried to keep from laughing, for I was a guilty person in deep need of charity and mercy. I tried to keep from bursting, and I succeeded—until she gravely said "There, now you know how it sounds."
>
> Then I exploded; the air was filled with my fragments, and you could hear them whiz. I said "Oh Livy, if it sounds like that God forgive me, I will never do it again!"
>
> Then she had to laugh herself. Both of us broke into convulsions, and went on laughing until we were physically exhausted and spiritually reconciled. (*Auto2* 346-348)

Just as the spirit of wrath can elevate the most innocuous remark and imbibe it with the aspersion and piquancy of profanity, conversely the lack of spirit can drain even the most poetic profanity of its passion and power. Although Livy is able to repeat Twain's masterly language, without the right energy and oration, the words are feeble, hollow, and ridiculous. Her pronunciation of the language was fine, but her "expression [was] velvety, unpractical, apprentice-like, ignorant, inexperienced, comically inadequate, absurdly weak and unsuited to the great language." Unable to describe the absurdity of Livy's recital with a single adjective, Twain uses eight different terms, descriptors piled upon descriptors, in a long list to drive home the sheer lack of artistry of her performance.

And he repeats this cataloguing of adjectives when he describes the effect: "In my lifetime I had never heard anything out of tune, so inharmonious, so incongruous, so ill-suited to each other as were those mighty words set to that feeble music." These almost hyperbolic lists serve to reinforce the sharp incongruity between words that are profane by definition and language that is profane because of its spirit, vigor, and artistry.

The poetry that Twain so admired in profanity can be traced not so much to the words themselves, but to the skill with which they are combined, the energy with which they are delivered, and the passion that they stir up within the soul. When spoken with the right tone, even the most commonplace and inoffensive words are made alive by the spirit of wrath and are transformed into the most profound and biting swear words. Likewise, when even the best profanity is delivered without the proper energy or emphasis, it falls short of its goal and does nothing more than make those who hear it shudder at the speaker's incompetence.

Notes

1. See also Justin Kaplan. *Mr. Clemens and Mark Twain: A Biography*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1966. Print. Pages 23-25.
2. See Steve Courtney. *Joseph Hopkins Twichell: The Life and Times of Mark Twain's Closest Friend.* Athens: U of Georgia P, 2008. Print

CHAPTER XI

Metaphors for Profanity

"If I cannot swear in heaven," Mark Twain once wrote, "I shall not stay there" (*Laughing* 80). For Mark Twain, swearing was a pervasive component of his life and writings. In his fiction and travel narratives, several of Twain's narrators are proficient in the art of swearing or remark admiringly about the profanity of others. A few of his sketches even revolve around the use and utility of profanity. When he sought to distinguish himself from the New England literati, Mark Twain relied on his rough-and-tumble rebellious persona in which swearing and smoking played a large role. Twain seldom gave a speech or met a celebrity without using or alluding to his colorful language. In his personal life, Mark Twain frequently employed profanity and was acknowledged by his companions as a master of the art. With his ear for the lyrical, Twain found in profanity the qualities of poetry. The sounds of words, their intonations and the inflection on certain syllables, the energy that carried them, and the rhythm and organization of a string of profanity delighted Twain and, in his mind, represented an epitome of language's poetic ability. But Twain's admiration of swearing went beyond merely a wordsmith's respect for an artfully crafted sentence. Something archetypal about the violent verbal expression of passion and anger appealed to Twain. The explosive energy and terrifying destructive power of volcanoes and thunder and lightning provided the perfect metaphors for artfully constructed and delivered profanity, implying that there was more to profanity that simply dirty words.

The Volcano

When Twain discusses profanity, he frequently describes it in relation to powerful and frightening natural phenomena, and one key image he uses is the volcano. For instance, when Twain met "the celebrated Russian revolutionist Tchaykoffsky" who was filled with passion and profanity, Twain observed that "he is grizzled, and shows age—as to exteriors—but he has a Vesuvius, inside, which is a strong and active volcano yet" (*Auto2* 452). In another example, Twain recalls a young man who told a story that was "all ablaze from beginning to end with crimson lava jets of desolating and utterly unconscious profanity!" (*Auto1* 284). The reference to "lava jets" no doubt ties the explosion of profanity to the force and power of a burning volcano. Describing the profanity of Chief Mate Davis, whom Twain knew from his time on the Mississippi River, Twain remembers that "In times of extreme emergency he would let fly a volcanic irruption [sic]" of swearing (*Auto1* 109). With such a reference to the energy and sheer destructive force of a volcanic eruption, Twain leaves readers with little doubt about Davis's powerful profanity. Another chief mate from Twain's time on the river was known to shout "Hump yourselves, *hump* yourselves, you petrifications, snail-bellies, pall-bearer! Going to be all *day* getting that hatful of freight out?"(*LOM* 160). Twain notes that the mate would "supplement this explosion with a firmament-obliterating irruption of profanity which nothing could stay or stop till his crater was empty"(*LOM* 160). The volcanic references, with the words "explosion," "irruption," and "crater," are unmistakable. In *Roughing It*, Twain introduces readers to the character Admiral "Hurricane" Jones who, when he is incited, undergoes a volcanic transformation:

> The Admiral seldom read newspapers; and when he did he never believed anything they said. He read nothing, and believed in nothing, but

"The Old Guard," a secession periodical published in New York. He carried a dozen copies of it with him, always, and referred to them for all required information. If it was not there, he supplied it himself, out of a bountiful fancy, inventing history, names, dates, and every thing else necessary to make his point good in an argument. Consequently he was a formidable antagonist in a dispute. Whenever he swung clear of the record and began to create history, the enemy was helpless and had to surrender. Indeed, the enemy could not keep from betraying some little spark of indignation at his manufactured history—and when it came to indignation, that was the Admiral's very "best hold." He was always ready for a political argument, and if nobody started one he would do it himself. With his third retort his temper would begin to rise, and within five minutes he would be blowing a gale, and within fifteen his smoking-room audience would be utterly stormed away and the old man left solitary and alone, banging the table with his fist, kicking the chairs, and roaring a hurricane of profanity. It got so, after a while, that whenever the Admiral approached, with politics in his eye, the passengers would drop out with quiet accord, afraid to meet him; and he would camp on a deserted field.

But he found his match at last, and before a full company. At one time or another, everybody had Desehteu Field enter the lists against him and been routed, except the quiet passenger Williams. He had never been able to get an expression of opinion out of him on politics. But now, just

as the Admiral drew near the door and the company were about to slip out, Williams said:

"Admiral, are you *certain* about that circumstance concerning the clergymen you mentioned the other day?"—referring to a piece of the Admiral's manufactured history.

Every one was amazed at the man's rashness. The idea of deliberately inviting annihilation was a thing incomprehensible. The retreat came to a halt; then everybody sat down again wondering, to await the upshot of it. The Admiral himself was as surprised as any one. He paused in the door, with his red handkerchief half raised to his sweating face, and contemplated the daring reptile in the corner.

"*Certain* of it? Am I *certain* of it? Do you think I've been lying about it? What do you take me for? Anybody that don't know that circumstance, don't know anything; a child ought to know it. Read up your history! Read it up, and don't come asking a man if he's *certain* about a bit of A B C stuff that the very southern niggers know all about."

Here the Admiral's fires began to wax hot, the atmosphere thickened, the coming earthquake rumbled, he began to thunder and lighten. Within three minutes his volcano was in full irruption and he was discharging flames and ashes of indignation, belching black volumes of foul history aloft, and vomiting red-hot torrents of profanity from his crater. Meantime Williams sat silent, and apparently deeply and earnestly interested in what the old man was saying. By and by, when the lull came,

> he said in the most deferential way, and with the gratified air of a man who has had a mystery cleared up which had been puzzling him uncomfortably:
>
> "*Now* I understand it. I always thought I knew that piece of history well enough, but was still afraid to trust it, because there was not that convincing particularity about it that one likes to have in history; but when you mentioned every name, the other day, and every date, and every little circumstance, in their just order and sequence, I said to myself, *this* sounds something like—*this* is history—*this* is putting it in a shape that gives a man confidence; and I said to myself afterward, I will just ask the Admiral if he is perfectly certain about the details, and if he is I will come out and thank him for clearing this matter up for me. And that is what I want to do now— for until you set that matter right it was nothing but just a confusion in my mind, without head or tail to it."
>
> Nobody ever saw the Admiral look so mollified before, and so pleased. Nobody had ever received his bogus history as gospel before; its genuineness had always been called in question either by words or looks; but here was a man that not only swallowed it all down, but was grateful for the dose. He was taken a back; he hardly knew what to say; even his profanity failed him.

The volcanic imagery here is unmistakable. When the Admiral becomes angry, he exhibits telling signs of the impending explosion: His "fires began to wax hot, the atmosphere thickened, the coming earthquake rumbled, he began to thunder and lighten."

In a matter of minutes the man transformed into a "volcano [that was] in full irruption and he was discharging flames and ashes of indignation, belching black volumes of foul history aloft, and vomiting red-hot torrents of profanity from his crater." As with the "crimson lava jets" of profanity earlier, the "red-hot torrents of profanity" provide the perfect image for searing, devastating language.

Occasionally, Twain chooses to extend the volcanic imagery when he discusses profanity. On December 18, 1905, Twain participated in a matinee that benefited the Jewish victims of the Russian revolution. During his speech, he discussed an incident where a friend of his incites an older man, whom the friend describes as a "human volcano," into blasting out the most violent and artful profanity:

> I was in a village which is a suburb of New Bedford several years ago—well, New Bedford is a suburb of Fair Haven, or perhaps it is the other way; in any case, it took both of those towns to make a great centre of the great whaling industry of the first half of the nineteenth century, and I was up there at Fair Haven some years ago with a friend of mine.
>
> There was a dedication of a great town-hall, a public building, and we were there in the afternoon. This great building was filled, like this great theatre, with rejoicing villagers, and my friend and I started down the centre aisle. He saw a man standing in that aisle, and he said:
>
> "Now, look at that bronzed veteran—at that mahogany-faced man. Now, tell me, do you see anything about that man's face that is emotional? Do you see anything about it that suggests that inside that man

anywhere there are fires that can be started? Would you ever imagine that that is a human volcano?"

"Why, no," I said, "I would not. He looks like a wooden Indian in front of a cigar store."

"Very well," said my friend, "I will show you that there is emotion even in that unpromising place. I will just go to that man and I will just mention in the most casual way an incident in his life. That man is getting along toward ninety years old. He is past eighty. I will mention an incident of fifty or sixty years ago. Now, just watch the effect, and it will be so casual that if you don't watch you won't know when I do say that thing—but you just watch the effect."

He went on down there and accosted this antiquity, and made a remark or two. I could not catch up. They were so casual I could not recognize which one it was that touched that bottom, for in an instant that old man was literally in eruption and was filling the whole place with profanity of the most exquisite kind. You never heard such accomplished profanity. I never heard it also delivered with such eloquence.

I never enjoyed profanity as I enjoyed it then-more than if I had been uttering it myself. There is nothing like listening to an artist-all his passions passing away in lava, smoke, thunder, lightning, and earthquake. (*Speeches* 290-292)

Here Twain uses a conceit to effectively draw parallels between the man's profanity and the eruption of a volcano.

Beginning with a simple metaphor, Twain introduces the conceit by having his friend describe the man as a "human volcano." Just as a volcano quietly houses searing magma beneath its surface, so too does the man suppress boiling anger beneath a cool façade. However, when the man's profanity bursts forth, he is "literally in eruption," and the explosion of profanity is a violent release of his pent-up anger. Certainly the images associated with Twain's noun, "eruption," are vivid, for when one thinks of a volcano, one often thinks of a terrifying fountain of red-hot lava spewing into the air or rivers of burning magma sliding down a mountainside, enveloping and incinerating everything they contact. Yet Twain intensifies the effect of his dramatic imagery by extending the analogy with the extraordinary descriptions associated with the most violent and frightening volcanic eruptions. Not only does he mention "lava" and "smoke," but Twain uses apocalyptic imagery that includes "thunder, lightning, and earthquake." Twain's description is both vivid and realistic. Scientists have found that clouds of ash, dust, and gas billow into the air from the volcano and create a pillar of hot ionized air which can trigger a lightning storm. The resulting display is a sheath of lightning that can extend throughout the plume and into surrounding clouds and make the sky appear as though it were rent with flame. The image is astounding. The profanity Twain references with this sublime description is more than the simple "damn" or "hell"; Twain refers to an explosion of words that metaphorically shakes the foundations of the earth, makes the sky red and white with fire and forks of flaming lightning, and leaves listeners thunderstruck with awe and terror.

The volcanic references Twain uses to describe profanity are powerful in their own right, but when one considers Twain's personal encounter with a volcano, one

discovers an entirely new level of significance to Twain's use of the volcanic imagery for profanity. Known as a no-frills sort of writer, Twain seldom uses overtly poetic descriptions unless he is deeply moved by the object of his description, and the volcano (like the river) is one of those few objects that moves him. By examining the language he uses to describe the volcano and the emotions that are connected to it, one discovers further significance in the analogy of the profanity as a volcano. While in Honolulu, Twain wrote a letter to his mother and sister, explaining that he had "staid [sic] at the Volcano about a week & witnessed the greatest eruption that has occurred for years" (*MTL1* 343). In his travel narrative, *Roughing It,* Mark Twain dedicates two entire chapters to his visit to the volcano of Kilauea in the Hawaiian Islands. The awe and wonder of such a sight moved Twain's poetic faculties tremendously. When he describes the streams of lava, Twain revels in dramatic lyrical language:

> Occasionally the molten lava flowing under the superincumbent crust broke through—split a dazzling streak…like a sudden flash of lightning….During a "thaw," every dismembered cake was marked by a glittering white border which was superbly shaded inward by aurora borealis rays, which were a flaming yellow where they joined the white border, and from thence toward their points tapered into glowing crimson, then into a rich, pale carmine, and finally into a faint blush that held its own a moment and then dimmed and turned black. (*RI* 396-397).

Twain's vivid language does more than simply describe the scene; through its poetic elements it reveals an underlying awe and respect Twain had for the volcano. The multi-syllabic words in the beginning of his narration create a deliberately protracted meter that

mimics the slow, rolling pace of the molten lava. The repetition of the throaty "l" sound in this passage also contributes to the effect by providing a reoccurring grumbling sound that no doubt imitates the noises of the volcano. When he discusses the colors of the cake, the chunks of cooled lava that have been reheated by the new rivers of lava, Twain is meticulous in his description, noting the gradual color changes and intense beauty of the burning rainbow they create. The "glittering white border" and "aurora borealis rays" seem almost supernatural, and the "faint blush" that glimmers a moment before melting into the black oblivion of the rock is a captivating image that suggests a profoundly philosophical sub-narrative. In his descriptions of the volcano, Twain reaches a level of sublimity that he typically only uses in his descriptions of the river. The river was a place that was intensely meaningful and emotional for Twain, and as a result Twain uses his most passionate Romantic and poetic language to describe it. However, the language that Twain uses to describe the river mirrors the language he uses here to describe the volcano, and his profound response to the volcano is directly reflected in his discussions of profanity described using volcanic imagery.

The pathos evidenced by his poetic description of the volcano carries over into Twain's descriptions of volcanic profanity, and the deeply profound awe and respect he displays for the volcano can likewise be seen in his admiration of powerful swearing. Remarking about the incredible craftsmanship one boy displays when he swears, Twain explains that the boy's narrative "was torch-lighten with indelicacies from end to end, which flickered lambent through a misty red hell of profanity rent and torn at four-foot intervals all down the line by sky-cleaving rocket explosions of gorgeous blasphemy!" (*Auto1* 285). Just as Twain uses the meter and organization of his prose to mimic the

slow pace of the oozing molten lava in his description of the Kilauea volcano, so too does he make the most of the syntax in this sketch in order to mimic the violent blast of profanity. Beginning with the words "a misty red hell," Twain strings together a long arrangement of short phrases that build in energy and mimic the explosive speed of volcanic eruption. Without any punctuation allowing the reader to pause for a breath, the clause demands that the reader speeds through the words and prepositional phrases in order to have enough breath to get through the entire sentence and reach the end with an adequate amount of air left in order to provide the emphasis of the exclamation point without gasping. In addition to employing the poetic structure, Twain also displays a similar attentiveness to vivid imagery in both the passage about the volcano in the previous paragraph and in the above description of profanity. The sparkling, glowing radiance of the language "which flickered lambent" through the young man's tale is as vivid a description as the reference to the "glittering white border" of the hot volcanic rock. And Twain's reference to the "sky-cleaving rocket explosions" is equally evocative. Finally, not only does the "misty red hell of profanity" provide a beautiful and terrifying image for the reader, but it also hints at a deep-rooted philosophical idea buried in the narrative, creating a complex visual that contains an underlying tension and depth—just like the description of the volcano.

Twain's comparison of profanity to volcanoes not only appears in stories he tells about others, but it also appears in incidents where Twain uses volcanic language himself. In a letter to Twichell on January 26, 1879, Twain describes how he struggled to sleep the night before:

Last night I awoke at 3 this morning, and after raging to myself for 2 interminable hours, I gave it up. I rose, assumed a catlike stealthiness, to keep from waking Livy, and proceeded to dress in the pitch dark. Slowly but surely I got on garment after garment—all down to one sock; I had one slipper on and the other in my hand. Well, on my hands and knees I crept softly around, pawing and feeling and scooping along the carpet, and among chair-legs for that missing sock; I kept that up; and still kept it up and kept it up. At first I only said to myself, "Blame that sock," but that soon ceased to answer; my expletives grew steadily stronger and stronger,—and at last, when I found I was lost, I had to sit flat down on the floor and take hold of something to keep from lifting the roof off with the profane explosion that was trying to get out of me. I could see the dim blur of the window, but of course it was in the wrong place and could give me no information as to where I was. But I had one comfort—I had not waked Livy; I believed I could find that sock in silence if the night lasted long enough. So I started again and softly pawed all over the place,—and sure enough at the end of half an hour I laid my hand on the missing article. I rose joyfully up and butted the wash-bowl and pitcher off the stand and simply raised——so to speak. Livy screamed, then said, "Who is that? what is the matter?" I said "There ain't anything the matter—I'm hunting for my sock." She said, "Are you hunting for it with a club?"

> I went in the parlor and lit the lamp, and gradually the fury subsided and the ridiculous features of the thing began to suggest themselves. (*MTPLetters* 26 January 1879)

Overwhelmed by his growing irritation and anger of the missing sock, Twain feels the volcanic pressure building inside him, and he is forced to root himself to the floor and grasp something solid around him to anchor himself as a volcanic eruption of profanity bursts out of him. Some things, according to Twain, were not supposed to be suppressed, and profanity was one of them. Like the bubbling magma that builds up pressure until it bursts through the earth's crust, the passions, energy, and anger that build and build within men find sweet release, according to Twain, only through skillful profanity.

Thunder and Lightning

In addition to comparing a whole-hearted eruption of profanity to a volcano, Twain frequently employed figurative language that describes profanity in terms of thunder and lighting. The sudden explosive bolt of lightning, like the volcano's volatile magma, became a picture for man's immediate and forceful need to swear, and the booming, rumbling thunder that shakes the ground a sensory equivelent for the sublimity of earth-shaking profanity. In *Life on the Mississippi*, Twain recalls a Zeus-like mate who threw his profanity around like thunderbolts:

> I was sorry I hated the mate so, because it was not in (young) human nature not to admire him. He was huge and muscular, his face was bearded and whiskered all over; he had a red woman and a blue woman tattooed on his right arm—one on each side of a blue anchor with a red rope to it; and in the matter of profanity he was sublime. When he was getting out cargo

> at a landing, I was always where I could see and hear. He felt all the majesty of his great position, and made the world feel it, too. When he gave even the simplest order, he discharged it like a blast of lightning, and sent a long, reverberating peal of profanity thundering after it. I could not help contrasting the way in which the average landsman would give an order with the mate's way of doing it. If the landsman should wish the gang-plank moved a foot farther forward, he would probably say: "James, or William, one of you push that plank forward, please;" but put the mate in his place, and he would roar out: Here, now, start that gang-plank for'ard! Lively, now! *What* 're you about! Snatch it! *snatch* it! There! there! Aft again! aft again! Don't you hear me? Dash it to dash! are you going to *sleep* over it! *'Vast* heaving. 'Vast heaving, I tell you! Going to heave it clear astern? WHERE 're you going with that barrel! *For'ard* with it 'fore I make you swallow it, you dash-dash-dash-DASHED split between a tired mudturtle and a crippled hearse-horse! (*LOM* 37-38)

Not only does the mate fire his orders like a "blast of lightning," but he couples them with thunderous clouds of profanity. Although to avoid censorship Twain chooses to "dash out" the actual words the mate uses, the reader can easily get a sense of the booming language and blasting invectives. And lest anyone miss the young Twain's ingenuous appreciation of the mate's thunder-and-lightning profanity, Twain concludes his description with the confession, "I wished I could talk like that" (*LOM* 38).

This metaphor of profanity as lightning and thunder within a man also occurs in *Roughing It*. Mark Twain describes Admiral "Hurricane" Jones as

> a roaring, terrific combination of wind and lightning and thunder, and earnest, whole-souled profanity. But nevertheless he was tender hearted as a girl. He was a raving, deafening, devastating typhoon, laying waste the cowering seas but with an unvexed refuge in the centre where all comers were safe and at rest. Nobody could know the "Admiral" without liking him; and in a sudden and dire emergency I think no friend of his would know which to choose—to be cursed by him or prayed for by a less efficient person. (*RI* 444-445)

By using the powerful atmospheric electrical discharge of lightning and the frightening sonic shock wave of thunder as metaphors for profanity, Twain elevates the man's wrath and subsequent vulgarity into a sublime force of nature. And to clarify that such powerful language does not always imply malevolence, Twain is quick to emphasize that despite the Admiral's "whole-souled profanity," he is "tenderhearted as a girl."

Something archetypal about the violent verbal expression of passion and anger of profanity deeply appealed to Twain. He frequently said that "he hoped he might die by a stroke of lightning without any warning of change from this life to the other" (*MFMT* 279). Moreover, the connection between the righteous judgment of God exacted through a well-placed lightning bolt and the righteous indignation of man expressed through lightning-like profanity was enchantingly sacrilegious.

Twain once said, "Thunder is good, thunder is impressive; but it is the lightning that does the work" (*EMT* 317). In many Protestant churches, parishioners were taught that God brought justice to impenitent sinners through forces of nature like lighting. Particularly as Calvinism became "one of the largest and most popular Protestant

movements" in the nineteenth century, this concept of lightning as the smiting hand of God against a sinful child was pervasive in the protestant doctrine in church Sunday schools (Berkhove 12). In such classes, Kaplan notes, "Grim theological pummelings, the adult world's explanatory key to all life's miseries, were continuous....God used death as his exemplary weapon to remind sinners to keep to the straight and narrow" (19). In his story "The Bad Boy Who Prospered," Twain satirizes the Sunday School books that were filled with this theology; he observes that "all the bad boys who get caught out in storms when they are fishing on Sunday, infallibly get struck by lightning" (*Sketches* 54). As a child, however, Twain was not as quick to dismiss such teaching; in fact, he suffered under the enormous weight of this seemingly very real judgment. In his biography of Twain and his boyhood in Hannibal, Dixon Wecter writes: "Presbyterianism and the Moral Sense it fostered—with its morbid preoccupation about sin, the last judgment, and eternal punishment—entered early into the boy's soul, leaving their traces of fascination and repulsion, their afterglow of hell-fire and terror, through all the years of his adult 'emancipation'"(88). "As a sensitive boy," Wector notes, Twain was "harrowed by the stern sermons of those times, frightened by near escapes from drowning, [and] cowed by the thunderstorms and night and the lightning that seemed to flash like the terrible swift sword of an avenging Diety" (88). For Twain, lightning was a very personal and powerful force.

Throughout *Life on the Mississippi,* Twain recalls his own harrowing experiences with the powerful bolts that many Calvinists perceived as demonstrations of the power of God, bolts believed to be sent as retribution from the heavens for men's evil deeds. Of one instance Twain writes,

When I was a small boy, Lem Hackett was drowned—on a Sunday. He fell out of an empty flat-boat, where he was playing. Being loaded with sin, he went to the bottom like an anvil. He was the only boy in the village who slept that night.

We others all lay awake, repenting. We had not needed the information, delivered from the pulpit that evening, that Lem's was a case of special judgment—we knew that, already. There was a ferocious thunder-storm, that night, and it raged continuously until near dawn. The winds blew, the windows rattled, the rain swept along the roof in pelting sheets, and at the briefest of intervals the inky blackness of the night vanished, the houses over the way glared out white and blinding for a quivering instant, then the solid darkness shut down again and a splitting peal of thunder followed, which seemed to rend everything in the neighborhood to shreds and splinters. I sat up in bed quaking and shuddering, waiting for the destruction of the world, and expecting it. To me there was nothing strange or incongruous in heaven's making such an uproar about Lem Hackett. Apparently it was the right and proper thing to do. Not a doubt entered my mind that all the angels were grouped together, discussing this boy's case and observing the awful bombardment of our beggarly little village with satisfaction and approval. There was one thing which disturbed me in the most serious way; that was the thought that this centering of the celestial interest on our village could not fail to attract the attention of the observers to people among us who might

otherwise have escaped notice for years. I felt that I was not only one of those people, but the very one most likely to be discovered. That discovery could have but one result: I should be in the fire with Lem before the chill of the river had been fairly warmed out of him. I knew that this would be only just and fair. I was increasing the chances against myself all the time, by feeling a secret bitterness against Lem for having attracted this fatal attention to me, but I could not help it—this sinful thought persisted in infesting my breast in spite of me.Every time the lightning glared I caught my breath, and judged I was gone.

In my terror and misery, I meanly began to suggest other boys, and mention acts of theirs which were wickeder than mine, and peculiarly needed punishment—and I tried to pretend to myself that I was simply doing this in a casual way, and without intent to divert the heavenly attention to them for the purpose of getting rid of it myself. With deep sagacity I put these mentions into the form of sorrowing recollections and left-handed sham-supplications that the sins of those boys might be allowed to pass unnoticed—Possibly they may repent. It is true that Jim Smith broke a window and lied about it—but maybe he did not mean any harm. And although Tom Holmes says more bad words than any other boy in the village, he probably intends to repent—though he has never said he would. And whilst it is a fact that John Jones did fish a little on Sunday, once, he didn't really catch anything but only just one small useless mud-cat; and maybe that wouldn't have been so awful if he had

> thrown it back—as he says he did, but he didn't. Pity but they would repent of these dreadful things—and maybe they will yet. But while I was shamefully trying to draw attention to these poor chaps—who were doubtless directing the celestial attention to me at the same moment, though I never once suspected that—I had heedlessly left my candle burning. It was not a time to neglect even trifling precautions. There was no occasion to add anything to the facilities for attracting notice to me—so I put the light out. (*LOM* Chapter 54)

Lightning seems to be more than merely a random act of nature; divine direction seems to guide this powerful and brilliant force. Expecting to be struck down for his boyish sins, Twain notes that "Every time the lightning glared I caught my breath, and judged I was gone." In this sense, lightning seems to perform a greater function than mere show; it attacks deserving targets with fiery accuracy. As Kaplan explains of this passage, "Thunder and lightning, emissaries of God's wrath, terrified [the young Twain]. He cursed the drowned boy for calling special attention to Hannibal, since the punishing angel, once in the vicinity, might decide to look around for other equally deserving boys" (19).

This belief about lightning striking the sinful according to the will of God was not limited to children. During Twain's lifetime, many adults held superstitious beliefs about why lightning would strike a person and how one could go about preventing it. In fact, Twain wrote a humorous sketch entitled "Mrs. McWilliams and The Lightning" which burlesques this pervasive fear of lightning. As the narrator explains in the introduction to the piece, lightning is "a particularly distressing infirmity, for the reason that it takes the

sand out of a person to an extent which no other fear can, and it can't be *reasoned* with, and neither can it be shamed out of a person" (*AC* 330). In many ways this statement proved true in Twain's own life. Although he overcame his childhood Calvinistic fear of lightning, he never seemed to completely shake the sense that there was something divine and just in this natural force. As a result, lightning proves to be a pervasive image and metaphor in Twain's writing, and he often writes of it with obvious awe and wonder. In *Life on the Mississippi*, for example, he recalls an especially sublime thunderstorm he encountered while on a riverboat:

> We had a heavy thunder-storm at Natchez, another at Vicksburg, and still another about fifty miles below Memphis. They had an old-fashioned energy which had long been unfamiliar to me. This third storm was accompanied by a raging wind. We tied up to the bank when we saw the tempest coming, and every-body left the pilot-house but me. The wind bent the young trees down, exposing the pale underside of the leaves; and gust after gust followed, in quick succession, thrashing the branches violently up and down, and to this side and that, and creating swift waves of alternating green and white, according to the side of the leaf that was exposed, and these waves raced after each other as do their kind over a wind-tossed field of oats. No color that was visible anywhere was quite natural—all tints were charged with a leaden tinge from the solid cloud-bank overhead. The river was leaden, all distances the same; and even the far-reaching ranks of combing white-caps were dully shaded by the dark, rich atmosphere through which their swarming legions marched. The

> thunder-peals were constant and deafening; explosion followed explosion with but inconsequential intervals between, and the reports grew steadily sharper and higher-keyed, and more trying to the ear; the lightning was as diligent as the thunder, and produced effects which enchanted the eye and sent electric ecstasies of mixed delight and apprehension shivering along every nerve in the body in unintermittent procession. The rain poured down in amazing volume; the ear-splitting thunder-peals broke nearer and nearer; the wind increased in fury and began to wrench off boughs and tree-tops and send them sailing away through space; the pilot-house fell to rocking and straining and cracking and surging, and I went down in the hold to see what time it was.
>
> People boast a good deal about Alpine thunder-storms; but the storms which I have had the luck to see in the Alps were not the equals of some which I have seen in the Mississippi Valley. I may not have seen the Alps do their best, of course, and if they can beat the Mississippi, I don't wish to. (*LOM* 355-356)

Even as adult, Twain can't deny the "electric ecstasies of mixed delight and apprehension" that accompany such a display of lightning. And with a bit of humor, Twain attempts to "mask" his fright (though he deliberately points it out for a laugh), by suggesting that he retreated below deck not for safety or out of fear, but simply because he wanted "to see what time it was."

Because lightning held personal significance for Twain, his comparisons between lightning and profanity are especially significant. When Twain describes profanity in

terms of lightning, he does more than simply relate the swiftness and dazzling brilliancy of the bolts to a sudden discharge of beautiful and passionate language. Rather, there is a subversive correlation between the righteousness of lighting striking the sinful and profanity blasting a deserving victim or situation. Lightning-like profanity functions similarly to the Calvinistic lightning as retribution for sins. As a result, within certain contexts Twain validates swearing as an acceptable, necessary, and even consecrated form of communication. When one experiences a situation that demands venting of the spirit of wrath, lightning-like profanity provides righteous release upon the heads of the deserving. No doubt Twain would find his maxim just as apt if he substituted "profanity" for "lightning" when he writes, "The trouble isn't that there are too many fools, but that the lightning isn't distributed right" (*MMM* 13).

For Twain, not all phrases are meant to fall trippingly off the tongue; some words are meant to be felt. Some words need to be felt. He once said, "If a man doesn't know that [profane] language he can't express himself on strenuous occasions. When you have that word at your command let trouble come" (*Speaking* 614). For Mark Twain, profanity is more than mere banal cussing; it serves as a sort of fortification in instances of intense stress and provides transcendent expression for the wordless fury that can fill a person's soul. When the spirit of wrath surges within a person, an eruption of profanity vents those burning and powerful emotions. And when one offends or sins against a person, lightning bolts of profanity allow for the dispensation of righteous judgment. One can imagine that when the fires of wrath were kindled inside of Twain, those around him who were familiar with his masterful discharge of profanity mentally shouting, "Watch out, Mount Mark Twain is about to blow!"

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