Aspects of Christianity in the Life and Works of Mark Twain (Abstract)

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Throughout the last years of his life, the legendary humorist and author Mark Twain produced some of the darkest religious satire of American literature. My thesis explores the nature and roots of this satire, with the aim of answering two overarching questions: what were Twain's beliefs/attitudes concerning the various aspects of Christianity? and What causes and reasons shaped those beliefs/attitudes?

The answer to the first question can be found in Twain's pertinent literary works, of which careful literary analysis reveals Twain's personal theology regarding God, the Bible, Christian values, and Christians themselves. My analysis includes Twain's works which touch on religion, including Letters from the Earth, Diary of Adam and Eve, “The War Prayer,” and his last novella, No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger. My thesis discusses Twain's various thoughts on and criticisms of Christianity as enumerated in these works.

As with most subjects on which he wrote, Twain did not shy away from blunt criticism, and some of his invective seems excessively harsh. In fact, some of his work was considered blasphemous by his own daughter and therefore suppressed posthumously for a number of years. Twain's writings on religion were deeply personal, particularly his invective against God, whom he seemed to blame for a number of personal tragedies. Despite Twain's reputation as a writer of tales of boyhood nostalgia, some points of his life was far from happy.

In answering the second question, my thesis focuses on two key periods of the life of Mark Twain: his childhood (1835-1847, ages 1-11), and his old age (1896-1910, ages 61-75). Both periods are marked by tragedy—namely, the illness and death of family members, friends, and Twain himself. Both periods, also, are marked by a focus on religion—the first by formative influence, the second by literary development; or, to put it another way: the first was unconscious, the second, conscious.

My thesis analyzes a less-commonly explored facet of Twain's life and work: his (highly contentious) views on Christianity. Although his religious satire is unquestionably darker than the majority of his better-known work, it does not detract from his worth as a writer. On the contrary, it enhances the complexity and depth of one of America's greatest literary humorists.