Satanic Mr. Twain

Introduction

The clues are all there, but no one has had the courage to face it. Twain was Satan. The Devil himself. Writer Ron Powers recognizes that “Twain was an untamable rogue, a kind of barely restrainable id, a great, dark, spirit” (Burns, pt.1), but he hasn’t pushed to discover the truth. Twain was Satan. Reader: do you dismiss this claim already? If so, simply step in line with all mankind—you people may revel in your ignorance together. But if you’re willing to face the truth—read on.

Look back: over the first sixty-years of his “life,” Twain cleverly built himself into a public celebrity, a nineteenth century American angel. Not an angel because he was flawless or avoided controversy, but because he was a man of the people. “His publisher began promoting him as ‘The People’s Author’” (Burns, pt.1). In a period where the masses harbored resentment towards the upper classes, he was their representative, their angel because he was a common man who had as much public influence as the most recognizable figuredheads in high society. “The 1870s was a time of unprecedented growth...Powerful new industrial interests got whatever they wanted from Washington” (Burns, pt.1). Not one to forget his humble Missouri roots, Twain published The Gilded Age in 1873, an attack on the corruption swarming around money, business, and politics. As Thomas Alva Edison explained, “The average American loves his family. If he
has any love left over for some other person, he generally selects Mark Twain” (Burns, pt.2).

The plan was in the works. The Devil Twain was luring in the masses. He traveled the world, giving lectures, posing for pictures, and volunteering quotes to newspapers and the media on a regular basis—always staying in the public spotlight and in people’s minds. They called him into their lives, their homes, their conversations, and their very thoughts—all through his literature. And because they invited him, he gained powerful influence on their minds and their hearts. Scholar Jocelyn Chadwick recognizes how effectively Twain built a loyal and trusting audience:

He weaves us in with the narrative—‘Look, I’m going to tell you a story.’ He gives us these seemingly, these seemingly simple sentences by these seemingly simple people who we end up trusting, just putting our whole soul and trust [into] and saying ‘Ok, I’ll bite, I’ll listen to the story.’ (Burns, pt.1)

Chadwick realizes that like many of Twain’s readers, she puts her “whole soul and trust” into his literature. He was so successful in reeling in the masses because he gave them what they desired most: an escape from the hardships of real life. “My works are like water. The works of great masters are like wine. But everyone drinks water” (Burns, pt.2), Twain once remarked. He cleverly defined himself and his writing for the public:

I have never tried, in even one single little instance, to help cultivate the cultivated classes. I was not equipped for it either by native gifts or training. And I never had any ambition in that direction, but always hunted for bigger game—the masses. I have seldom deliberately tried to instruct them, but I have done my best to entertain them, for they can get instruction elsewhere. (tq.com)
It all makes sense when analyzed from the proper perspective. The Devil’s disclaimer was his attempt to convince readers not to take him too seriously: he urged them to consider him as just an entertainer, not an influential leader, instructor, or manipulator.

Scholar Louis J. Budd recognizes Twain’s early focus. In *Mark Twain - Social Philosopher*, Budd writes that “For entertainment it is sensible to prefer the younger Twain; for challenging bursts of vision it is better to take the older Twain.” Though Budd’s assessment of the changes in Twain’s literature may be correct, the changes don’t reflect Twain’s personal growth, but simply his more focused approach to exposing mankind’s flaws in later works. Once the masses loved him as an entertainer, the Devil was able to gradually introduce more and more instruction (which Budd sees as “challenging bursts of vision”) into his literature. Budd analyzes the “plunges into pessimism that spoiled the serenity of [Twain’s] sunset years,” and determines that “Even in those years...his hunger for the truth could drive him to fresh insights that were brilliant rather than glowering.” Budd misses the point here--Twain didn’t suddenly grow pessimistic. From the start he desired to show the distasteful truth about mankind through his literature, but first he had to sell himself to the public as an entertainer.

However, even in early works like *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, there are traces of the Devil Twain’s desire to expose the flawed nature of man. Tom is the one boy in the town full of real spirit and spunk, yet the townspeople (the masses) dismiss and reject him for the majority of the story. It’s not until after they think Tom’s dead, in a scene where Tom eavesdrops on his own funeral, that people deem him worthy of value. Huck Finn flees civilization with Jim, and as he travels down the River he sees human
cruelty, ignorance, and hypocrisy all the way to their destination: the hellish Deep South. Twain shows how men support a culture of slavery, are fools and suckers at every turn, and are usually afraid to stand up for what they think is right. Yet in these novels and other earlier works, Twain catered to the masses by overshadowing his lessons about mankind with witty dialogue, clever plots, lifelike characters, and exciting adventures.

Scholar Cynthia Ozick was more enlightened than Budd, though she also failed to realize that Twain was the Devil himself. In her essay "Mark Twain and the Jews," she properly identifies the unusual connection between Twain and Satan that was always present in his literature at some level.

Mark Twain, early and late, is always preoccupied with the devil and his precincts: the devil is certainly the hero of The Mysterious Stranger...where he is a grand imaginer who appears under the name of Dream, though his dreams are human nightmares, and his poetry destroys. In this view (and who will separate it from Mark Twain's metaphysical laughter?), the devil is a writer, and the corrupter of Hadleyburg a soulless figure who comprehends that words can carry more horror, and spread more evil joy, than any number of coveted treasures. (Ozick, 59) (my italics)

In addition to highlighting the link ("early and late") between Twain and the Devil in "The Mysterious Stranger," Ozick also recognizes it in "The Man that Corrupted Hadleyburg." But the nature of the Devil, as she describes it, is extremely revealing and is something we’ll deal with more later. Fittingly, she realizes that Twain’s “devil is a writer” whose “poetry destroys,” and that the devilish figure in the latter story causes pain and suffering once he sees that “words can carry more horror, and spread more evil joy, than any number of coveted treasures.” Obviously the portrayal of Satan as a writer and poet,
with words as his evil weapons of corruption and despair, suits Twain perfectly.

From here we can proceed to delve deeper. In his manuscript "The Chronicles of Young Satan," Twain makes the links between himself and Satan so blatantly, it’s a wonder that we missed it. But that was all part of his plan. We had an honest chance to recognize Twain for who he is, but we blew it. This fits with Twain’s overall argument—as Satan, truth is his weapon. As writer David Bradley explains, “Mark Twain told the truth. He saw what we were about and was not afraid to deal with things that other people were afraid to deal with” (Burns, pt.1). The Devil Twain no longer needs to ruin pure and innocent men, for he did so in the Garden of Eden when he tempted Adam and Eve, instigating their Fall. Unblemished man no longer exists—man is inherently flawed, a “bad apple” at the core, so to speak. As the writer Twain, the Devil’s mission is to expose the truth about what man has become.

Editors Paine and Duneka must be the devil’s cabana boys, for they have further confused and misled mankind with “The Mysterious Stranger.” Hailed as Twain’s final work, it has become extremely popular as an entertaining adventure story that includes an exciting brush with the famous author’s dark side. But the story is actually what scholar William T. Gibson describes as “an editorial fraud” (Gibson, 1)—the first ninety pages of the widely read text come from Twain’s manuscript "The Chronicles of Young Satan," while the last two pages (chapter XI) and the title come from a separate manuscript: “No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger.” In short, the Paine-Duneka version doesn’t reflect Twain’s true creation. Many of the ignorant souls who might have discovered the truth about Twain’s devilish nature from "The Chronicles of Young Satan," have instead chosen to read the more
entertaining, fraudulent text. By doing so, they missed out on many of the clues about Twain’s true identity, and thus were unable to save themselves from his dangerous influence.

Let us now begin to examine “The Chronicles of Young Satan” to see for ourselves how it suggests that Twain was the Devil. Beware, for this mission should not be broached by those weak in mind or spirit. Some clues establish a solid link between the writer Twain and the story’s character of Satan. Others explain the function of Twain’s story and how it defiles the minds and souls of mankind, which is after all, the Devil’s primary goal.

A word of caution. Reader--if you precede without the proper perspective, you will not find satisfaction. To read “The Chronicles of Young Satan” as William K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley would, which is to avoid “The Intentional Fallacy” by focusing on the text as a work unto itself--without regard to the author--clearly will not do. We cannot put on such blinders and hope to discover the truth. Rather, open your mind, and just consider the possibility: Twain was Satan. If your mind shouts ten thousand objections, such as “He can’t be Satan, because he never would have been so nice, so generous, so kind and so loving,” let the words of Twain’s Satan quell your protests: “Your race never know[s] good fortune from ill. They are always mistaking the one for the other. It is because they cannot see into the future” (115). In short--man cannot hope to understand every action of the Devil. Don’t bother to try.

The Link: Twain and Satan

“The Chronicles of Young Satan” begins in Austria, 1702, in what was called the “Age of Faith...but they meant it as a compliment, not a
slur” (35). From the start, the author ridicules religion, and though this is fitting for Satan, it alone proves nothing. By including an early fable--The Assuaging of the Devil--Twain mocks himself and portrays “the odious Enemy of mankind” (41) as a helpless fool, thus relaxing the readers (who are his future prey). Overall, the opening chapter and a half simply sets the scene. Our place: an isolated, ignorant village. Our perspective: the point-of-view of an uneducated boy named Theodor.

In the opening pages of the second chapter, Twain provides some crucial information about the nature of angels which initiates the link between himself and supernatural beings. As background, the experienced serving man Felix Brandt teaches us that the angels he has seen “had no wings, and wore clothes, and talked and looked and acted just like any natural person, and you would never know them for angels, except for the wonderful things they did which a mortal could not do” (44). And as the character of Satan later reminds us, “[the Devil] was an angel himself once” (52). As we read this now, aware of Twain’s true identity, could these words be any more telling? Twain is explaining his present state at the time he wrote his manuscript--that despite his human form, his lack of wings, and his rather normal behavior, he was actually an angel. What set him apart were the “wonderful things” he could do which were beyond mortal capabilities. For example, T.S. Eliot proclaimed Twain to be “one of those writers...who have discovered a new way of writing” (Eliot, 54). His way was certainly new, for as an angel (even a fallen one), he wasn’t limited by the human condition. Writer Ron Powers explains that Twain’s “genius was for...internalizing and then flawlessly reproducing the voice of the American people.” He knew the masses better than they knew themselves. One of the wonderful things he could do, beyond
mortal capabilities, was characterize the masses with supernatural accuracy.

Not impressed? Okay skeptics, have a little patience—you will see the truth before we are done.

But before we get too far into our examination of Twain as the Devil, we must tackle a common question: is the character of Satan really supposed to be the Devil? In a word: yes. The stranger introduces himself as Satan, and the boys freeze.

Satan laughed, and asked what was the matter. It was a natural laugh, and pleasant and sociable, not boisterous, and had a reassuring influence upon us; so I said there was nothing much the matter, only it seemed a strange name for an angel...“Because it’s—it’s—well, it’s his name, you know.” (48)

As readers, we may have suspected that this was the Devil, and when Satan introduces himself, our assumption is that since his name is Satan, he is the Satan—the Garden’s serpent, the Devil, the wicked one himself. And yet many readers tend to follow Theodor to another conclusion. Theodor is swayed by the young stranger’s nice looks and friendly laugh—he wants to believe that the angel is not actually the Devil, so on his own he decides that “there was nothing much the matter.” Theodor believes what he wants to believe, and Satan simply plays along, explaining that he is only the Devil’s nephew and that he just shares the name. Theodor decides to trust Satan, and it leads to trouble. Only naïve readers would follow along and actually trust Satan’s playful misdirection when he claims the Devil is not him, but is instead his uncle.

At a key point in the story, Theodor’s sister Lilly refers to Satan (who she knows as the human Philip Traum) in a way that blatantly
connects him with Twain. Lilly and her mother chat about Traum’s career plans in the following excerpt:

“No,” said my sister, “he looks higher.”
“Higher? What is he going to be?”
“An author.”
“Author of what?”
“When he has finished his education at Heidelberg, he is going to write the history of Roman jurisprudence and codify the Roman laws.” (99)

This passage cannot be overlooked. With the description of Satan as a future author, Twain is making the link between himself and the Devil so apparent that it is surprising he doesn’t stop to wink at his readers. As Twain once said, “The difference between the right word and almost the right word is the difference between lightning and the lightning bug” (Burns, pt.1). His injection of the word “author” into this section is no coincidence. Ironically, Lilly imagines the profession of an author to be high and noble, while the Devil Twain, ruler of the underworld, is the lowest being in existence. Jurisprudence is the science or philosophy of law, and to be an author of Roman codes and inscription echoes of the far past. Originally, priests and church scholars were the primary ones who wrote, and their work consisted of copying, codifying, and inscribing. The Devil Twain’s irony continues: for this type of laborious writing is what led to the very first printing press, invented in the mid 1400s for reproducing the Bible. Twain is an author of literature, with much darker themes and power at hand, and the contrast between Lilly’s fantasy of Traum’s future and the actual state of things bites with Twain’s wit.

When Theodor lies in bed and reflects upon Satan’s effect on the village, the “blame” (or credit) for all that has transpired is really
something Twain takes upon himself. Theodor’s thoughts about the recent developments around town properly frame much of what has occurred.

What a lot of dismal haps had befallen the village, and certainly Satan seemed to be the father of the whole of them: Father Peter in prison...Marget’s household shunned ...Father Adolf acquiring a frightful and odious reputation, and likely to be burnt at the stake presently...My parents worried, perplexed, distressed about their daughter’s new love-freak and the doubtfulness of its outlook; Joseph crushed and shamed; Wilhelm’s heart broken and dissipation laying its blight upon his character, his ambition and his fair repute; Marget gone silly, and our Lilly following after; the whole village prodded and pestered into a pathetic delirium about non-existent witches and quaking in its shoes: the whole wide wreck of desolation of hearts and hopes and industries in the work of Satan’s enthusiastic diligence and morbid passion for his business. And he, the author of all the trouble, was the only person concerned that got any rapture out of it. (111) (my italics)

Could any one passage be more helpful to clue us in to Twain’s true identity than this one? It was Twain, the true Devil, who was literally “the author of all the trouble” outlined here. With the barefaced, outright use of the word “author,” Twain immediately superimposes himself on the story. And who’s role does he take? Satan’s, of course. Every author must create pain and conflict as part of his plot, but the Devil Twain goes extra heavy on it. Twain makes it clear here--while he is responsible for everything that’s happened in this fictional story, he is not the source of sin or evil--man is. Twain is wielding his weapon of truth, and the truth is that man is inherently flawed. The Devil Twain, like the character of Satan in this story, has simply acted to expose these people for what they really are at the core: selfish, petty, and afraid to stand up for
their beliefs. This is Twain’s horrid pleasure, and he gets “rapture out of it.”

The Garden of Eden

Twain’s devilish nature is further illustrated by his story’s powerful connections to the Garden of Eden. Let us first explore the connections, then delve into what these points show about the Devil Twain. In God’s original paradise, Adam and Eve lived simple lives. The simply village of Eseldorf is similarly the boys’ Garden. Before Satan appears on the scene, the setting is described in the following manner:

Austria was far from the world, and asleep, and our village was in the middle of that sleep, being in the middle of Austria. It drowsed in peace in the deep privacy of a hilly and woody solitude where news from the world hardly ever came to disturb its dreams, and was infinitely content...to the left, was a tumbled expanse of forest-clothed hills cloven by winding gorges where the sun never penetrated. (35-36)

The portrait is clear. The village is “infinitely content” in its figurative sleep, and it is blessed by its geographic and intellectual isolation. The people are disturbed neither by news (knowledge of the outside world) or by the sun (a common symbol of enlightenment). And thus they remain at peace. The same was true for Adam and Eve—they were isolated and didn’t have to know anything, for everything was provided for them, and struggle was non-existent. Survival was a given, and did not require work.
As Theodor’s continues to describe their haven, more similarities appear: “Eseldorf was a paradise for us boys. We were not overmuch pestered with schooling...The priests said that knowledge was not good for the common people, and could make them discontented with the lot which God had appointed them” (36). The message is clear. While Twain doesn’t explicitly write that Eseldorf was “a paradise for us boys” because they weren’t forced to learn, it’s hinted at, and is further emphasized by the priests’ stance. Knowledge leads to trouble. As we look to the Garden, doesn’t God’s treatment of Adam and Eve mirror the stance of the priests? God tells Adam and Eve that they may do whatever they want, but that they may not eat the fruit from one specific tree. Does he tell them why? No. God doesn’t give Adam and Eve knowledge, he doesn’t provide an explanation, for they should not need reasons unless they are “discontented with the lot which God had appointed for them.”

And this is where Twain, the Devil, enters both stories. In Eseldorf, Satan appears before the curious boys, ready to teach them new things, feed their hunger for explanations, their hunger for knowledge. So too appears the devilish serpent in the Garden of Eden—tempting Adam and Eve’s appetite for an explanation to the questions that irk them: ‘Why can’t we eat the forbidden fruit, and what will happen if we do?’ Adam and Eve are fundamentally curious, and it is the temptation of knowledge, not petty hunger, that leads them to sin and to their Fall from the Garden. Note here that the devil in both stories tempts man with knowledge. Can the implications be any more blatant? Twain is a writer, a primary provider of knowledge, one who’s entire career is by definition dedicated towards creating and providing some sort of knowledge for curious readers. Again: Twain, the snake in
the Garden, and the character of Satan all tempt mankind by focusing on their desire for knowledge.

In the Garden, the snake articulately reasons back and forth with Eve until he convinces her to take an apple. In Twain’s manuscript, Nikolaus, Seppi, and our narrator Theodor encounter a young stranger, who promptly wins them over with his verbal ability and a couple feats of magic. “He was bent on putting us at ease, and he had the right art; one could not remain timorous and doubtful where a person was so earnest and simple and gentle and talked so alluringly as he did” (45). Note that from the beginning the stranger is described as one who had the right art, and that his art is the tactful use of communication. The connection to Twain is simple and uncomplicated: Twain was certainly an artist, skilled with words and communication.

The relationships between these devilish figures and their respective audiences strengthens the link that binds them. The name Theodor literally means “god-lover,” and yet it is Satan who captures Theodor’s attention. Adam and Eve are clearly god-lovers, and yet it is the serpent who wins by encouraging them to commit sins. So too with the Devil Twain: the majority of readers are “god-lovers,” yet they follow the Twain and rush for his literature. The serpent leads Adam and Eve to satisfy their desires, while Satan helps Theodor and the other villagers feed their curious appetites and Twain instructs and entertains his readers.

Twain makes the connection absolutely unmistakable when the character of Satan virtually takes the role of the serpent himself. As Theodor explains,

[Satan] said he would give us any kind of fruit we liked, whether it was in season or not. We all spoke at once—
"Orange"
"Apple"
"Grapes"
"They are in your pockets," he said, and it was true. And they were the best, too, and we ate them and wished we had more. (46)

Lest anyone miss the link between Satan and the serpent in the Garden of Eden, Twain goes out of his way to make it completely obvious in this passage. After eating the apple in the Garden, Adam and Eve are forever tainted by the serpent and sin. This scene is essentially the boys’ Fall--from this point on, Satan has control of them. Likewise, this passage grabs hold of Twain’s readers. The story jumps into new, uncharted realms of magic and the supernatural. While they may have been tempted before, now they have gotten a taste. An author’s “fruit” is his literature, and Twain’s readers will ‘wish they had more.’

**Immortal Creators**

During the boy’s first meeting with Satan, Twain’s authorial role is further defined with devilish implications. Having assured the boys that as an unfallen angel he is “ignorant of sin...[and] not able to commit it” (49), Satan makes tiny animals and people out of clay. As Paul Barolsky explains in his critical essay, “Leonardo, Satan, and the Mystery of Modern Art,” through this act, Satan is pointedly established as a Promethean-style creator, and he creates a little village of over five hundred people. When “the small noise” they make begins to annoy him, Satan takes “the heavy board seat of our swing and [brings] it down and mash[es] all those people into the earth just as if they had been flies” (50). Like the Satan in this story, Twain (the
author and ultimate creator of thousands of people in his stories) gives life and takes it away—when he kills off a character, it is not a sin, for it is not done maliciously. Barolsky wisely points out that “Mark Twain’s Satan...is the sublime destroyer. He epitomizes the destructive power of the modern artist.” The boys cry when Satan wipes out the entire village he’s created, but Satan’s reply is appropriate: “It is no matter, we can make more” (52). So too would Twain respond, if he was chastised for tearing up a manuscript full of life-like characters. The creator can always make more. If this connection between Satan the creator and Twain the creator seems a stretch at this point—have faith. Twain creates scenes which make the point clearer, perhaps even too obvious, as the story continues.

In chapter six, Twain draws more comparisons between himself and Satan as creators. In an extremely telling speech, Satan explains his power to Theodor:

My mind creates! Do you get the force of that? Creates anything it desires—and in a moment. Creates without materials; creates fluids, solids, colors—anything, everything—out of the airy nothing which is called Thought. (114)

Though Satan goes on to differentiate between his power and men’s imaginations, the earlier creator link is bolstered here. This speech could very well be coming from the mouth of the true Devil, Twain. Like the character Satan, Twain’s mind “creates anything it desires—and in a moment. Creates without materials...out of the airy nothing which is called Thought.” The widespread success of Twain’s literature is testament to the supernatural powers of his mind: As the Devil, what
his mind creates is fundamentally better, fundamentally more real and
lifelike, than things from the average man.

As creators, Twain and Satan exist on a fundamentally different
level than the products of their minds. Satan explains the distinction
between himself and mortal man in a way that mirrors Twain’s
relationship to his characters. After Theodor “ask[s] him why he made
such a difference between man and himself” (55), Satan replies in
earnest:

The difference between man and me? The difference
between a mortal and an immortal? Between a clod and a
spirit?...Man is made of dirt--I saw him made. I am
not made of dirt. Man is a museum of disgusting
diseases, a home of impurities; he comes to-day and is
gone to-morrow, he begins as dirt and departs a stench;
I am of the aristocracy of the Imperishables. (55)

This fits Twain’s devilish identity perfectly. To Satan in this story,
there is no difference between real man and the little clay people he
made moments earlier--both are made of dirt, while he is a spirit, an
“Imperishable.” The same holds true for Twain as the Devil. There is
no difference between the characters he creates and real man--both are
temporary constructs if he chooses to destroy them, while he (as a
fallen angel), is everlasting. Satan’s explanation also exhibits his
distaste for mankind--man is inherently “a home of impurities,” he
argues. Twain felt a similar disgust with many of his characters and
with mankind at large. In a letter to William Dean Howells, he wrote:
“I have been reading the morning paper. I do it every morning--knowing
well that I shall find in it the usual depravities and basenesses and
hypocrisies and cruelties that make up civilization, and cause me to
put in the rest of the day pleading for the damnation of the human race” (tq.com).

Mortal authors’ relationship to their characters is the opposite of Satan’s: art is their sole path to immortality. It is their characters that can live on for centuries and last forever, while they have limited life-spans. Many scholars have characterized Twain’s creations in this manner. As filmmaker Ken Burns explains, “His genius was being able to tap that well [of knowledge about mankind]...and being able to call it up and save it...to make enduring, immortal literature” (Burns, apndx). Similarly, writer William Styron once said that “All a man ever had to do to achieve immortality was to write a book like Huckleberry Finn.”

Of course the Devil’s reign as an angel is eternal, though his work on earth as Twain was not, for Twain was “born” in 1835 and “died” in 1910. The Devil Twain points to the immortal nature of his art, should he choose to let the public worship it, in a key anecdote late in the story. When the chief game-keeper Bart starts to attack him, “Satan turned him into stone--clothes, gun and all” (143). The stone figure of Bart is seen by the people as a wonderful creation:

All the crowd admired the statue, and were full of wonder at its minute fidelities to fact...as a portrait the work was perfection...Siebold the drunken artist was there, and he said there was not another work of art in Europe that could match this one for modeling and tone. (144)

This is another example as Satan the supernatural creator and artist, and is obviously an example which Twain himself has created. During the trial that follows Bart’s death, the intentions of the statue’s creator are debated by the coroner’s jury. Did the statue’s creator
solely judge Bart worthy of death, or also condemn the stone fly
perched on Bart’s left cheek? The ridiculous debate that follows
highlights the distinction between Satan the creator and the products
he creates. Stepping back, we see this as an example of Twain creating
characters who are essentially debating Twain’s own intentions—for it
is Twain who really moves the plot and Twain who really created the
statue from Bart. As the chapter ends, Twain tells us of how the
statue was kept by the family at first, and how

Public exhibition began, and was inordinately successful, children and servants half-price, and
crowds coming from all over the Empire, and even from foreign countries...After many, many years it was sold,
and passed from hand to hand and country to country, and now for a long time it has been in the Pitti palace
in Florence, earning its living as a Roman antique. (146)

Here the Devil Twain shows how his art--his creation--can be
immortalized, how it can be endlessly worshipped, adored and
appreciated, even if it comes at the cost of a human life. While as
the Devil, his creations do not outlast him, they are part of his
eternal influence on the lives and minds of mankind.

The Story’s Function: Harmful Enlightenment

So far we’ve explored the ways in which Twain hints at his
devilish nature and what it entails, through his carefully crafted
text. But perhaps equally impressive is how the Devil Twain’s creation
of "The Chronicles of Young Satan" actually functions to corrupt and weaken its very own readers. In an 1884 letter to fellow scholar W. D. Howells, Twain wrote:

Isn't human nature the most consummate sham & lie that was ever invented? Isn't man a creature to be ashamed of in pretty much all its aspects? Is he really fit for anything but to be stood up on the street corner as a convenience for dogs? Man, "Know thyself --& then thou wilt despise thyself, to a dead moral certainty." (tg.com)

Here Twain explicitly outlines his plan to corrupt humanity, and it's decidedly simple: draw man from his ignorance so he is forced to "know [him]self" and his "human nature" "in pretty much all its aspects." That's it. Once enlightened, man will "despise [him]self, to a dead moral certainty." As Twain, the Devil has flipped a traditional relationship upside down: no longer is truth linked with God and faith and hope--instead it is linked with Satan, despair and suffering. And a few of us saw it coming. Both the snake in the Garden, and the character of Satan tempted man by focusing on his desire for knowledge and truth. In both cases, man's desire for knowledge led to pain and suffering. Twain illustrates again and again in "The Chronicles of Young Satan" that man's only real escape is ignorance--if Twain can force mankind to learn, he'll be able to sit back and let the despairing souls roll in. The story warns readers of the dangers of enlightenment again and again, all the while enlightening them--page by page--in a decidedly devilish cycle.

The very first anecdote Theodor recounts has a clear pro-ignorance, anti-learning moral. A strange woman visited Eseldorf and "began to persuade some of the ignorant and foolish to...
real message’...[She] sought out only those few who could read—flattering them by saying it showed their intelligence, and that only the intelligent could understand her doctrine” (36). This tale cleverly parallels the relationship between Twain and his readers, as we will soon see. Gretel Marx, one of the women drawn in by the strange woman’s offerings, is sitting alone and reading the Bible when Father Adolf happens along. “What is it you’ve got there, Frau Marx? What are you reading?” he asks. “She let him see. He bent down and took one glance, then he knocked the book out of her hand and said angrily—’Burn them, burn them, you fool! Don’t you know it’s a sin to read them? Do you want to damn your soul?...You are on your road to hell’” (38). This excerpt has magnificent implications for those who recognize that Twain was actually Satan. We saw how earlier he had said he had never focused on just “the cultivated classes...but always hunted for bigger game—the masses.” In this scene, he is practically telling us precisely who he’s hunting for: “those...who could read.” Twain is almost offering a warning to his readers—his literature attracts those with intellectual curiosity, and those who are intelligent enough to “understand [his] doctrine.” It’s primarily those people who will shed their peaceful ignorance, gain knowledge, and consequently suffer. Just like the priest—though for different reasons—the Devil Twain is warning the readers of “The Chronicles of Young Satan”: ‘If you read on you will “damn your soul” and be on the “road to hell.”’

Theodor’s sister Lilly thinks that she is enlightened about Philip Traum, but she’s actually ignorant, and it’s the latter quality that is shown to be the source of her happiness. After she falls in love with Satan (as Traum), Theodor tries to convince her that Satan doesn’t and will never love her back. Her response is to brag about
her knowledge of the issue while scoffing at her younger brother’s lack thereof.

You don’t know, and can’t know, that he will never love me; so you need not bother yourself any more about the matter. Through my sympathies, my perceptions and my love I know him; know him as no one else knows him; know him as no one else can ever know him. And you shall not take my golden hope from me—no one shall! He will love me yet, and only me. (110)

The irony at play here highlights the value of ignorance. Though Lilly suggests her brother is ignorant, it is she who overestimates her personal knowledge about the inner feelings of Traum. If she were actually enlightened, and knew the truth: that she had fallen in love with Satan (the Devil himself!) and that he would never love her in return, she would be absolutely miserable. It’s her ignorance that allows her the “golden hope” of mutual love and inspires “a glory in her eyes that made her beautiful” (111). Her almost threatening words that “no one shall” take from her her ignorance even further underscores how much she values it over enlightenment. Conversely, Theodor is plagued by his knowledge of his sister’s hopeless love— it’s his enlightenment that causes him pain. This all fits with the Devil Twain’s notion that knowledge leads man to despair and suffering.

Near the end of the story, Twain’s treatment of Father Peter further emphasizes his perspective on ignorance. Satan promised Theodor that he would make Father Peter happy, and after the trial he appears before the priest and scares him so violently that the old man goes insane. When Theodor objects, Satan explains:

What an ass you are!...Are you so unobservant as not to have found out that sanity and happiness are an
impossible combination. No sane man can be happy, for to him life is real, and he sees what a fearful thing it is. Only the mad can be happy, and not many of those. The few that imagine themselves kings or gods are happy, the rest are no happier than the sane. (164)

How does this relate to Twain’s objective as the Devil? It supports his judgment that ignorance can be bliss, while knowledge is the path to despair and certain hell. Father Peter loses his reason and thus escapes the mental state where “life is real.” He not only is at no risk for any future enlightenment, but he is more ignorant than in his previous sane state. Father Peter will never “know [himself]” as a inherently flawed member of the human race and thus never “despise [himself] to dead moral certainty.” He is at the peak happiness that man can achieve, more ignorant than the villagers ever were, and thus blissful beyond the boys in their virtual “paradise” of Eseldorf.

At a critical point late in the story, Theodor is faced with the Devil Twain’s ultimate challenge for man. Twain recognizes that man often has a perverse desire for enlightenment and knowledge, even though it will lead him to pain and suffering. After all, part of what excites the boys about Satan is that he teaches them new things—its the dangerous risk linked with learning that adds to the excitement. So Twain, through Satan, creates a major temptation. Satan, Seppi, and Theodor drink wine from heaven, which the Devil had magically conjured up for them.

We drank it, and felt a strange and witching ecstasy go stealing through us, and Seppi’s eyes filled and he said worshipingly—

"We shall be there some day, and then—"
He glanced furtively at Satan, and I think he hoped Satan would say, “Yes, you will be there some day,” but Satan seemed to be thinking about something else, and said nothing...The goblets rose...and disappeared. Should I ever see mine again? Would Seppi ever see his?
Until this day I do not know. I never asked, and Seppi never asked. It is best not to inquire too far, in some matters, if you want to be comfortable. (139)

Here Twain virtually dares Theodor to forego his ignorance and ask for enlightenment. He’s essentially challenging Theodor to “know [him]self,” because he believes if man is forced to know himself, he will “despise [him]self, to a dead moral certainty.” If Theodor really was a worthy person, he wouldn’t have to ask Satan whether he was destined for heaven or hell--the question would not be a question--either in his heart or in his mind. But he isn’t sure of his nature, and despite his desperate desire for the answer to the question of his future, he doesn’t dare ask, for “It is best not to inquire too far, in some matters, if you want to be comfortable” (139). And of course the fact that he doesn’t take the Devil Twain’s challenge further suggests that Twain is right about the value of ignorance and the dangers of enlightenment.

Twain’s story produces eternal pain and suffering. The tool of Satan himself, “The Chronicles of Young Satan” poisons readers with a most dangerous type of enlightenment: lifelong realization. Enlightened readers of Twain’s story may forget the plot--perhaps even the most dramatic scenes--but the lessons about humanity will plague their conscious, subconscious, or unconscious minds forever. And this is the Devil’s “rapture.” Twain’s logic is undeniable, his points irrefutable. Is man the only creature on Earth with The Moral Sense? Yes: it is a fact. And is man thus the only creature who intentionally, maliciously, hurts others? Yes: it is a fact. Are men constantly led like scared sheep by the loud majority, afraid to speak up against it due to their own selfish fears? Yes: it is a fact--and
history stands as witness. As scholar Sholom Kahn points out, in scene after scene after scene “The majority of the villagers are following their all-too-human instincts of self-interest and fear...even the boys” (64). These are just a few examples of how the text enlightens readers, forcing them to learn about themselves and about humanity in general. Twain’s story mounts a strong case against man, and while some of it is flawed, much is undeniable. The enlightened reader comes to this realization upon completion of "The Chronicles of Young Satan," and he or she is never the same. Never a true idealist. Never fully trusting of mankind’s instinct (which serves a self-preserving purpose) or mankind’s “Moral Sense.” And thus the reader is forever tainted, and Satan wins another soul. The only way for people to avoid this fate is to remain ignorant. But fair and open-minded readers of Twain’s story no longer have that option--they cannot go back and unread the tale. Their eyes have been opened forever, and save madness, they will never find a way to fully escape their knowledge.

Putting It All Together

Having covered so much ground, let’s recount what we have accomplished. We’ve shown that the link between Twain and the Satan is absolutely undeniable. Not just Twain’s interest in Satan, but that he saw much of himself in the Devil and blatantly fashioned the character of Satan in “The Chronicles of Young Satan” after himself. Both Twain and Satan are articulate manipulators skilled in the ways of verbal communication. Both tempt man with forbidden fruits of knowledge. Both are immortal creators whose power stems from their minds, and whose art can have an immortality of its own. Just as the “god-lover”
Theodor grows to depend on Satan, the “god-loving” readers grow to depend on Twain. The connections between the two are indisputable.

Furthermore, we’ve shown that Twain’s story functions to serve the Devil’s purpose. In his story, he illustrates for us how blissful and pleasant ignorance can be, while at the same time characterizing enlightenment as dangerous and harmful. And yet this harmful enlightenment is cast directly upon his readers, forcing them to “know [themselves]” so that they will “despise [themselves], to a dead moral certainty.” As Ozick so articulately put it, “words can carry more horror, and spread more evil joy, than any number of coveted treasures.”

When we put all this together, we have a straightforward case. While we can never prove that Twain was Satan, the clues are certainly there. The old saying reasons that “If it looks like a duck, and it sounds like a duck, then it probably is a duck.” That’s the most decisive type of approach we can take here. Twain practically told us he was Satan in his manuscript by defining the character of Satan as an author who was a virtual clone of himself. Twain also acted like Satan, causing mankind painful, ever-lasting enlightenment through his text. So if he said he was Satan, and he acted like Satan, and he has been corrupting mankind like Satan, well then by golly he probably was Satan!
Works Cited


http://twainquotes.com. (Quotes retrieved 01/21/02).

[Note: parenthetical citation (tq.com) refers to http://twainquotes.com.]

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