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Unclean Spirit: The Changing Face of Satan and The Embracing of Blasphemy in Popular Culture

“…but whoever may blaspheme against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin”—because they said, “He has an unclean spirit.”

-Mark 3:29 La Biblia Latinoamericana

Blasphemy, the lack of reverence to that which is considered sacred, is an interesting sin. In the Bible is declared an unforgivable sin as it says in the quote above. In the Gospel of Mark even Jesus himself is accused of blasphemy for forgiven sins, something only God can do. Punishments for this sin range from Acts of Reparation and imprisonment, to death sentences and eternal damnation. Dante describes them in *Inferno* as part of the Inner Ring of the Eight circle of Hell, laying on flaming sand with fire raining on them.

Blasphemy is not a light sin. Yet the last serious conviction in the UK was in 1921, in the US it was in 1838.

“Blasphemy” has become part of everyday slang and incorporated itself into entertainment. In today’s movies and general popular culture it is not odd to see characters taken right from the pages of sacred texts. Jesus and Satan are regulars in cartoon shows; angelic beings and wars in heaven make the basis of comic books and televisions series; and books bring reinterpretations of the Gospels in some cases even with a comedic turn. What brought this slow but sure change on the perception of the sacred? In this essay I will argue on how Milton’s *Paradise Lost* opened the flood gates, by giving his reinterpretation of *Genesis* and the poem’s place in the cannon of English literature he broke the untouchable position of these characters, with one of
the earlier and better known works to follow Milton, Mark Twain’s short stories and essays that play with Genesis.

Mark Twain is well known for his satirical writings, his use of sarcasm when criticizing different aspects of society. In *Huckleberry Finn*, written in the middle of his career and considered the great American novel, he uses humor and satire to bring forward social criticism. He was no stranger to adapting characters from myth and legend, his book *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court*, plays and subverts the Arthurian legends creating his own version of these characters. In 1904 he publishes a short story, “Extracts From Adam’s Diary”, a revision of Genesis as if translated from Adam’s own writings, later followed by “Eve’s Diary” in 1905. Adam and Eve are part of the untouchable canon of the Bible, as well as the Genesis story. But Twain disregards almost everything about the canonical version and seems to base his characterization more on another source of reinterpretation, *Paradise Lost*.

1. THE INTRODUCTION OF ADAM AND EVE

*The Diaries of Adam and Eve*, the collected version of these stories opens with Eve and her first day and she already shows herself to very self-aware. She starts off describing herself as something that is being observed or studied:

“If I feel like an experiment; I feel exactly like an experiment. It would be impossible for a person to feel more like an experiment than I do, and so I am coming to feel convinced that that is what I am – an experiment, just an experiment and nothing more.” (Twain, *Diaries of Adam & Eve*, 12)
This could be tied to the moment in book four *Paradise Lost* where it is explained that Eve seems to be more independent than Adam. Adam seems to have to explain what she was. Eve recounts it in lines 480 to 489:

“...to give thee being I lent/ Out of my side to thee/...Part of my soul I seek thee, and thee claim/ My other half” Whit that thy gentle/ seized mine; I yielded...” (Milton,p128)

It is interesting to note here that while the Eve’s seem to be similar, both authors characterize Adam very differently. In Milton’s Genesis Adam is much more gentle, it is not until after the fall that there seems to be any kind of violence in the garden, but Twain has a very defensive and aggressive Adam. In *Paradise Lost* Eve is created because he asked for companionship, a favor from the Father. He recounts this to Raphael in Book 8, lines 470-477:

“...Under his forming hands a creature grew,/ Manlike, but different sex, so lovely fair/...And in her looks, which from that time infused/ Sweetness into my heart unfelt before,/ And into all things from her air inspired/ The spirit of love and amorous delight.” (Milton, p 228)

Compare this with the first entry in Adam’s diary in Twain’s work:

“This new creature with the long hair is a good deal in the way. It is always hanging around and following me about. I don’t like this; I am not used to company. I wish it would stay with the other animals...”(Twain,p 14)

Another example of his more aggressive and to a level rejection of Eve in the diaries is how Twain handled the naming of things. In *Paradise Lost*, Milton keeps it close to Genesis by having Adam be given the task by God, a task he finds easy because God has already given him all this knowledge. But
Twain’s Adam does not do the naming. Most of his entries he points out the words he uses to describe things come from Eve. He complains of this in one of his entries:

“I get no chance to name anything myself. The new creature names everything that comes along before I can get in a protest. And always the same pretext – it looks like the thing. There is the dodo, for instance. Says the moment one looks at it, one sees at a glance that it “looks like a dodo.” It will have to keep that name, no doubt. It wearies me to fret about it, and it does no good anyway. Dodo! It looks no more like a dodo than I do.” (Twain, p 28)

Adam and Eve are the cornerstone of humanity, the example of how relations between men and women would be. By both complicating what is a simple definition of these two characters now they take a deeper dimension. They turn from placeholders for humanity to characters that now can mean more than man and woman and bringers of sin.

2. GOD AND SCIENCE

There is a big difference between the two works and yet similar, how they treat God. As she learns more about the garden in Twain’s work, Eve is looking for complex, scientific explanations; she has already referred to herself as an experiment so she approaches everything with a very scientific mind. This shows the very different worldviews of the authors. Milton did not step away from the biblical cannon when a Book in Paradise Lost is set at points that coincide with moments in Genesis. Twain was not a religious man, he had not reason to keep line to line to the cannon. He presents these as translations, already an idea that they will not match the story we know. This
is also writings that come after Darwin publishes *On The Origin of Species*. As a man interested in the developing sciences at the turn of the century, it is not surprising that Twain tries to give the story off creation a more "modern" view.

In his work there is no real mention of God, the figure is completely absent from their writing by name. Even at the fall there is no real mention. This is a contrast to Milton, who does want to keep it in a religious context. But his god is distant from the action, in Book 3 were God is conversing with the son he tells him that he is all knowing. This brings in to doubt his role on the events in the rest of the poem. Does he not stop Satan’s fall or that of Adam and Eve with a purpose? Could it had been avoided?

It is interesting to compare this to Twain’s portrayal of god in *Letters From The Earth*. His role is short “When the Creator had finished thinking, He said, “I have thought. Behold!”…At the end of an hour the Grand Council was dismissed.” (Twain, *Letters*, p 3) To Twain it is more like he is disinterested with creation and lets it go. While Milton has him observing even if he knows every next move, Twain has him ignore them. In both cases this is a big move when it comes to characterization. Giving one’s own opinion and interpretation of Adam and Eve is not as grand as giving an opinion on God, the unknowable, the creator. Even Milton here is charting dangerous territory. But at the same time he opens the doors to works like Twain’s that can use this figure to explore other themes. But it is not only God who gets a revision; the angels and Satan also get a review.

3. ANGELS AND DEMONS

Of all of the influences *Paradise Lost* has given to literature it is the character of Satan. While Adam and Eve have enough information in the Bible
to move from. The character of Satan is not really defined in it. The first clear
mention comes in the Book of Job. He is not an enemy of god but is called
one of his children (Job 1:6) and God sanctions all his attacks on Job. His role
in this is to test, to see how far man’s fate goes. When the figure of the
tempter called the devil appears in Matthew 5:1 he does not seem the be the
same character that was Satan, this one does not have his actions sanctioned
and is referred to by a different name.

The Angels have a similar definition, albeit a bit clearer. Gabriel and
Raphael are referred by name as well as Michael in the Book of Daniel, but
most of the names of angels and their hierarchy comes from apocryphal
writings and traditions that have grown with time. Of all the characters in
Paradise Lost the Angels and the Demons, whose names also come more
from medieval texts than the christian cannon, allow Milton the greatest
amount of flexibility. Satan is the one that stands out and whose influence in
popular culture has been felt the most. He is the reason Blake classifies
Milton as part “of the Devil’s party without knowing it.” (Blake, Plate 6). Satan
or Lucifer has become a name that is common in the western cannon. And
Twain also took him and gave him another new form.

Letters From the Earth, like the diaries, is supposed to come from another
author, in this case Satan. It is a supposed collection of letters from the
aforementioned being to Michael and Gabriel. The tone is mocking, the
sarcasm and satire that define Twain. But for the purpose of this paper the
importance of this tone is how it is close to the way this character is
interpreted. His letters mock The Fall, the idea of heaven, the bible itself.
Unlike the diaries, this was truly a blasphemous book. It is why it is not
published fully until the 1960’s, Clara Clemens, Twain’s daughter, was worried of how it would affect the image of her father.

The first interesting aspect of this his relationship to Michael and Gabriel. When describing the fall of Lucifer Twain describes it as “He was ordered into banishment for a day – the celestial day. It was a punishment he was used to, on account of his too flexible tongue.” (Twain, Letters, p7). Contrasting it to the epic fall into the lave of fire of Book 1 of Paradise Lost it is rather anti-climatic. It is even described as a common occurrence. There is nothing different about this that has not happened before. Twain continues to describe what set’s this particular banishment apart:

“Formerly he had been deported into Space, there being nowhither else to send him, and had flapped tediously around there in the eternal night and the Artic chill; but now it occurred to him to push on and hunt up the earth and see how the Human-race experiment was coming along. By and by he wrote home – very privately - to St. Michael and St, Gabriel about it.” (Twain, Letters, p7)

Once more there is the mention of experiments, of earth and humanity as something being observed. The letters are notes he sends to his fellow angels. In this setting, Satan has a lot in common with Eve from the diaries. His observations are clearer than the ones she records, he knows names of things and seems to be able to look beyond in time. It is interesting observe that Satan and Eve have common ground since it recalls on the Fall how it is done in Paradise Lost, with Satan’s seductive offers of knowledge and calling her “Mother of science” (Milton, p 252) in Book 8. Paradise Lost introduces to the world the seductive and beautiful Satan, the gentlemanly demon. This
inspires not just future incarnations of Satan but other demonic characters; it influences the Byronic hero, the vampiric lover, and the dark gentleman. The traits shred by them can be traced back to Milton’s characterization. By Twain we see what set’s apart Satan from the brooding hero, his attitude once he has fallen.

4. A DEVILISH EXQUISITE CORPSE

Character types are shaped over the years with different writers taking on the same character and building on, like the exercise of the exquisite corpse mentioned in the subtitle, where each artist adding to what the previous had made would make a work of art. This form of development is in part what has slowly kept the blasphemy of altering these characters on a road to acceptance. By building on what Milton started Twain adds attitude. And in *Letters From The Earth* he creates the more sarcastic and humorous devil we have come to see in popular culture.

In his second letter Satan goes to list aspects of what humanity calls heaven. He lists how for example humanity “…has lefts entirely out of it the supremest of all delights, the one ecstasy that stands first and foremost in the heart of every individual of his race – and of ours – sexual intercourse!” (Twain, *Letters*, p 8) He jokes on how singing and harp playing play part on this heaven, that “All white people hate noise; yet they have tranquilly accepted this kind of a heaven – without thinking, without reflection, without examination…” In the third letter Satan takes to mocking the Genesis itself, making it an invention of humanity. He talks of them eating the fruit and how it gave them knowledge, “What knowledge – useful knowledge? No – merely
knowledge that there was such a thing as good, and such a thing as evil, and how to do evil.” (Twain, Letters, p 17)

These taunts are similar to the way we have come to see Satan portrayed. We have come to admire more than fear the character of devil with many saying that he might not even exist and has been a literary creation all along. Hell has been slowly pieced together from sources not as divine, we picture fire and brimstone because Dante described it as such or from the images in Paradise Lost itself. And it’s reigning monarch, Satan, Lucifer, the devil and so many other names, has been similarly shaped. This is what has given way to what seems like an accepted form of blasphemy, once an image has been incorporated into the tradition, basing a portrayal out of it is no longer considered a mockery or a sin, it is just working with what has been told to us are these beings. And that allows future generations to add their own part of this exquisite corpse.

Letters From The Earth shows what is obviously an educated Satan, a scientific Satan a that. He looks for logic in humanity and how it relates to the Father and even to himself and sin. At points he even seems sorry for the humans, he is no longer just the serpent and tempter, now he is also the observer and at points defender of the humans when he sees no logic, he pities humanity. His last letter is almost like he is sad for what humanity has to deal with and directly criticize how God has handled it, an echo of how in Milton he calls god tyrant and unjust. He talks of history and it's bloodshed and how it is perceived by the Creator:

“He makes no distinction between innocent and guilty. The babies were innocent, the beasts were innocent, many of the men, many of the
women, many of the boys, many of the girls were innocent, yet they had to suffer with the guilty. What the insane Father required was blood and misery; he was indifferent as to who furnished it.” (Twain, Letters, p 53)

This is not the voice of a Satan who just wants to take humanity with him for the thrills; this is concern for those he has been observing. Twain has gone as far as to plainly make him the “good guy” in his book. The view of Satan as the hero in Paradise Lost might have been misunderstanding, but the on in Letters From The Earth in plain to see, he has made the final transformation to being on “our” side.

5. MODERN DAY SATAN

While it could be argued that the oldest portrayal of the devil to influence modern writers and artist is the one from Faust, Mephistopheles is not originally Satan himself, he is a demon, not THE devil. This is what sets Paradise Lost apart. These are not other characters, they are the Christian dogma and are called so by name. There is no doubt Lucifer is THE devil. Many will talk of Milton’s portrayal of Satan’s fall as if it was gospel. This is the characterization that sets motion to what we see in Twain.

In modern popular culture the Devil takes all kinds of forms, usually handsome or seductive like in Paradise Lost as is shown in films like The Devil’s Advocate and shows like The Twilight Zone. He is a smooth talker like he is portrayed in songs like “Sympathy For The Devil” by The Rolling Stones and “N.I.B” by Black Sabbath. Some have even gone as far as to take on Twain’s idea of a benevolent devil, if still for selfish reasons when in the film The Prophecy he stops and oncoming hell on earth – he wanted no
competition with his own- or in the comics *Hellblazer* where he gives the main character John Constantine a second chance on life—to prove his soul belonged in hell— in both cases he stops humanity from falling pray to Angels and their own interests in the two cases above Gabriel.

There is plenty of more examples, from the pages of romantic poetry like *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* to the trashy comedy of *South Park* and *Futurama*. And like mentioned above it is not just Satan who seems to have gone through a radical change, Gabriel has gone from the angelic messenger to a warrior at times against god; Michael has been turned into a lovable if rather lazy angel in film. If anything the one who still seems to hold an unmovable place and still be the one who could be advocated that to alter him is blasphemy is the Son. Jesus has remained rather untouchable. Most interpretations will try to “humanize” him like *The Last Temptation of Christ* or *Jesus Christ Superstar*. Even in comedy there is still a level of respect; *Family Guy* has had several episodes where he appears but is kept as the good savior for the most part and the film *Dogma* and the novel *Lamb* both do it in a roundabout way by using an apostle and a friend respectively to “correct” our view of Jesus.

Back in the Rome and Greece, in Egypt and the Northern lands mythology was ever changing. The gods would appear along the humans and had at times odd views and different lands saw them in different ways. Blasphemy was a more complex concept than merely joking about the divine in places like Pompei where cartoonish phallic images of Hermes adorn doorways. They would embrace other religions an while tenuous, had a level of respect for other faiths, not the need to destroy them for the one true way. Even today
in places like China, Japan and India their gods are constantly revised. What sets the Judeo-Christian mythology, a word that become to mean “fake” but is the correct word to describe this, that they had been for so long untouchable? Milton starts of trying to attempt something new, he opens the floodgates to seeing the divine in a new light, to not fear trying to understand it from our point of view. Satan says it best at the closing of *Letters From The Earth*:

“The Beatitudes and the quoted chapters from Numbers and Deuteronomy ought always to be read from the pulpit together; then the congregation would get an all-round view of Our Father in Heaven. Yet not in a single instance have I ever known a clergyman to do this.”

(Twain, *Letters*, p 56)
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Bibliography


