

# THE LOWEST ANIMAL

by Mark Twain

## BACKGROUND

The works of Mark Twain (1835–1910) are marked by a relaxed, humorous manner of observation. In the following essay, Twain satirizes human nature by describing some experiments he supposedly conducted at the London Zoological Gardens. Twain takes Charles Darwin’s theory that humans evolved from earlier ancestors, or “lower animals,” and turns it upside down.

## Man is the Reasoning Animal. Such is the claim.

I have been studying the traits and dispositions of the “lower animals” (so-called) and contrasting them with the traits and dispositions of man. I find the result humiliating to me.

For it obliges me to renounce<sup>1</sup> my allegiance to the Darwinian theory of the Ascent of Man from the Lower Animals, since it now seems plain to me that that theory ought to be vacated in favor of a new and truer one, this new and truer one to be named the *Descent of Man from the Higher Animals*. **A**

10 In proceeding toward this unpleasant conclusion, I have not guessed or speculated or conjectured, but have used what is commonly called the scientific method.<sup>2</sup> That is to say, I have subjected every postulate<sup>3</sup> that presented itself to the crucial test of actual experiment and have adopted it or rejected it according to the result. Thus, I verified and established each step of my

1. **renounce:** give up; reject.
2. **scientific method:** research method in which a theory is tested by careful, documented experiments.
3. **postulate** (PAHS CHUH LIHT): assumption.

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## **A** VOCABULARY

### Word Study

*Descent* is a noun, related to the verb *descend*, which means “come down.”

*Descent* is the opposite of *ascent*, which means “upward movement; rise.”

Explain what you think Twain means by “the *Descent of Man from the Higher Animals*.”

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**A** VOCABULARY

**Selection Vocabulary**

*Verified* (line 14) is the past tense form of the word *verify*. To *verify* something means to prove it. How could you verify the meaning of a word?

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**B** LITERARY FOCUS

**Satire** often begins by sounding straightforward and serious. The satirical message begins to come through as the information gets less believable. What elements of Twain's opening paragraphs make it seem like a serious study?

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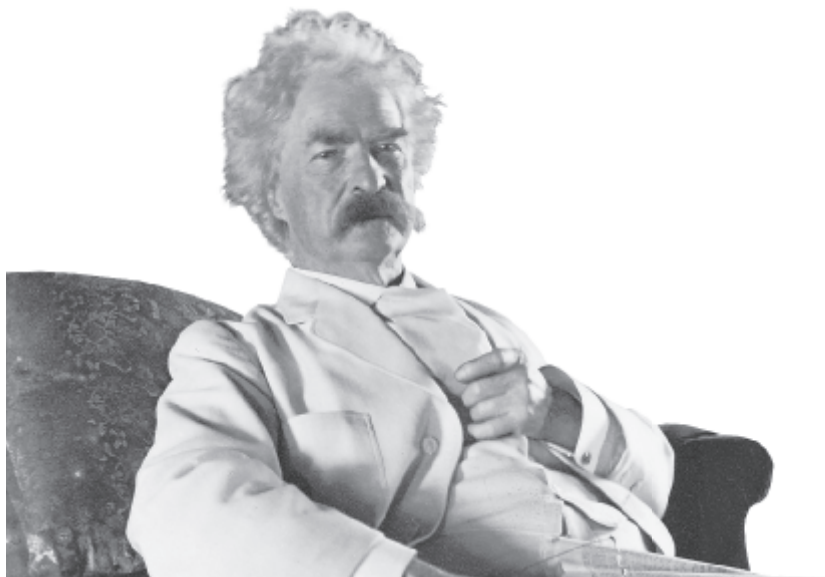
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**C** LANGUAGE COACH

Circle the stressed syllable in each of the following words: *exhibits*, *variations*, *preferences*, *procession*. Use a dictionary if you need help.



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course in its turn before advancing to the next. **A** These experiments were made in the London Zoological Gardens and covered many months of painstaking and fatiguing work. **B**

Before particularizing any of the experiments, I wish to state one or two things which seem to more properly belong in this place than further along. This in the interest of clearness. The massed experiments established to my satisfaction certain generalizations, to wit:

1. That the human race is of one distinct species. It exhibits slight variations—in color, stature, mental caliber, and so on—due to climate, environment, and so forth; but it is a species by itself and not to be confounded with any other.

2. That the quadrupeds<sup>4</sup> are a distinct family, also. This family exhibits variations—in color, size, food preferences, and so on; but it is a family by itself.

3. That the other families—the birds, the fishes, the insects, the reptiles, etc.—are more or less distinct, also. They are in the procession. They are links in the chain which stretches down from the higher animals to man at the bottom. **C**

Some of my experiments were quite curious. In the course of my reading, I had come across a case where, many years ago,

4. **quadrupeds**: four-footed animals.

some hunters on our Great Plains organized a buffalo hunt for the entertainment of an English earl—that, and to provide some fresh meat for his larder.<sup>5</sup> They had charming sport. They killed seventy-two of those great animals and ate part of one of them and left the seventy-one to rot. In order to determine the difference between an anaconda<sup>6</sup> and an earl—if any—I caused seven young calves to be turned into the anaconda’s cage. The grateful reptile immediately crushed one of them and swallowed it, then lay back satisfied. It showed no further interest in the calves and no disposition to harm them. I tried this experiment with other anacondas, always with the same result. The fact stood proven that the difference between an earl and an anaconda is that the earl is cruel and the anaconda isn’t; and that the earl wantonly destroys what he has no use for, but the anaconda doesn’t. This seemed to suggest that the anaconda was not descended from the earl. It also seemed to suggest that the earl was descended from the anaconda, and had lost a good deal in the transition. **D**

I was aware that many men who have accumulated more millions of money than they can ever use have shown a rabid hunger for more, and have not scrupled<sup>7</sup> to cheat the ignorant and the helpless out of their poor servings in order to partially appease<sup>8</sup> that appetite. I furnished a hundred different kinds of wild and tame animals the opportunity to accumulate vast stores of food, but none of them would do it. The squirrels and bees and certain birds made accumulations, but stopped when they had gathered a winter’s supply and could not be persuaded to add to it either honestly or by chicanery.<sup>9</sup> In order to bolster up a tottering reputation, the ant pretended to store up supplies, but I was not deceived. I know the ant. These experiments convinced me that there is this difference between man and the higher animals: He is avaricious and miserly, they are not. **E F**

5. **larder:** supply of food or place where food supplies are kept.

6. **anaconda:** long, heavy snake that crushes its prey.

7. **scrupled:** hesitated because of feelings of guilt.

8. **appease:** satisfy; pacify.

9. **chicanery** (SHIH KAYN): clever deception; trickery.

### **D** LITERARY FOCUS

How can you tell that Twain is using **satire** in this paragraph to make his point about humans?

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### **E** VOCABULARY

#### Selection Vocabulary

To be *avaricious* means to be greedy. Knowing this, what do you think the noun *avarice* means?

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### **F** READING FOCUS

Based on what you have read so far, what do you think is Twain’s **purpose** for writing?

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**A** VOCABULARY

**Selection Vocabulary**

Use context clues to write a definition for *atrocious* below. Circle the context clues that helped you.

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**B** QUICK CHECK

According to Twain, why is a cat innocent for doing the same thing a person might do?

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In the course of my experiments, I convinced myself that among the animals man is the only one that harbors<sup>10</sup> insults and injuries, broods over them, waits till a chance offers, then  
70 takes revenge. The passion of revenge is unknown to the higher animals.

Roosters keep harems,<sup>11</sup> but it is by consent of their concubines;<sup>12</sup> therefore no wrong is done. Men keep harems, but it is by brute force, privileged by atrocious laws which the other sex was allowed no hand in making. In this matter man occupies a far lower place than the rooster. **A**

Cats are loose in their morals, but not consciously so. Man, in his descent from the cat, has brought the cat's looseness with  
80 him but has left the unconsciousness behind—the saving grace which excuses the cat. The cat is innocent, man is not. **B**

Indecency, vulgarity, obscenity—these are strictly confined to man; he invented them. Among the higher animals there is no trace of them. They hide nothing; they are not ashamed. Man, with his soiled mind, covers himself. He will not even enter a drawing room with his breast and back naked, so alive are he and his mates to indecent suggestion. Man is the Animal that Laughs. But so does the monkey, as Mr. Darwin pointed out, and so does the Australian bird that is called the laughing jackass. No—Man  
90 is the Animal that Blushes. He is the only one that does it—or has occasion to.

At the head of this article we see how “three monks were burnt to death” a few days ago and a prior was “put to death with atrocious cruelty.” Do we inquire into the details? No; or we should find out that the prior was subjected to unprintable mutilations. Man—when he is a North American Indian—gouges out his prisoner's eyes; when he is King John,<sup>13</sup> with a nephew to render untroublesome, he uses a red-hot iron; when he is a

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10. **harbors:** clings to; nourishes.  
11. **harems:** groups of females who mate and live with one male.  
12. **concubines:** secondary wives.  
13. **King John:** king of England from 1199 to 1216, known for seizing the throne from his nephew Arthur.

religious zealot<sup>14</sup> dealing with heretics<sup>15</sup> in the Middle Ages, he  
100 skins his captive alive and scatters salt on his back; in the first  
Richard's<sup>16</sup> time, he shuts up a multitude of Jewish families in  
a tower and sets fire to it; in Columbus's time he captures a family  
of Spanish Jews and—but *that* is not printable; in our day in  
England, a man is fined ten shillings for beating his mother  
nearly to death with a chair, and another man is fined forty  
shillings for having four pheasant eggs in his possession without  
being able to satisfactorily explain how he got them. **C** Of all  
the animals, man is the only one that is cruel. He is the only one  
that inflicts pain for the pleasure of doing it. It is a trait that is not  
110 known to the higher animals. The cat plays with the frightened  
mouse; but she has this excuse, that she does not know that the  
mouse is suffering. The cat is moderate—unhumanly moderate:  
She only scares the mouse, she does not hurt it; she doesn't

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14. **zealot** (ZEHL UHT): overly enthusiastic person; fanatic.  
15. **heretics** (HEHR UH TIHKHS): people whose beliefs oppose the major beliefs of their religion.  
16. **first Richard's**: refers to Richard I (1157–1199), also called Richard the Lion-Hearted, king of England from 1189 to 1199.



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**C** READING FOCUS

A shilling is a unit of money that used to be used in some countries, such as Great Britain. What do you think is Twain's **purpose** for telling the story about the fines that two different men received?

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**A** VOCABULARY

**Academic Vocabulary**

How is Twain's description of the cat's behavior *relevant*, or related, to his purpose for writing?

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**B** LITERARY FOCUS

Is this sentence an example of **exaggeration** or **irony**? Explain.

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**C** READING FOCUS

Twain grew up before the Civil War in a state that allowed slavery. What might his **purpose** be for including this paragraph about slavery?

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dig out its eyes, or tear off its skin, or drive splinters under its nails—man fashion; when she is done playing with it, she makes a sudden meal of it and puts it out of its trouble. Man is the Cruel Animal. He is alone in that distinction. **A**

120 The higher animals engage in individual fights, but never in organized masses. Man is the only animal that deals in that atrocity of atrocities, war. He is the only one that gathers his brethren about him and goes forth in cold blood and with calm pulse to exterminate his kind. He is the only animal that for sordid wages will march out, as the Hessians<sup>17</sup> did in our Revolution, and as the boyish Prince Napoleon did in the Zulu war,<sup>18</sup> and help to slaughter strangers of his own species who have done him no harm and with whom he has no quarrel.

130 Man is the only animal that robs his helpless fellow of his country—takes possession of it and drives him out of it or destroys him. Man has done this in all the ages. There is not an acre of ground on the globe that is in possession of its rightful owner, or that has not been taken away from owner after owner, cycle after cycle, by force and bloodshed. **B**

140 Man is the only Slave. And he is the only animal who enslaves. He has always been a slave in one form or another, and has always held other slaves in bondage under him in one way or another. In our day he is always some man's slave for wages and does that man's work; and this slave has other slaves under him for minor wages, and they do *his* work. The higher animals are the only ones who exclusively do their own work and provide their own living. **C**

Man is the only Patriot. He sets himself apart in his own country, under his own flag, and sneers at the other nations, and keeps multitudinous uniformed assassins on hand at heavy expense to grab slices of other people's countries and keep *them* from grabbing slices of *his*. And in the intervals between

17. **Hessians** (HEHSH UHNZ): German soldiers who served for pay in the British army during the American Revolution.

18. **Prince Napoleon . . . Zulu war**: In search of adventure, Prince Napoleon, son of Napoleon III, joined the British campaign against Zululand (part of South Africa) in 1879.

campaigns, he washes the blood off his hands and works for “the universal brotherhood of man”—with his mouth.

150 Man is the Religious Animal. He is the only Religious Animal. He is the only animal that has the True Religion— several of them. He is the only animal that loves his neighbor as himself, and cuts his throat if his theology isn’t straight. He has made a graveyard of the globe in trying his honest best to smooth his brother’s path to happiness and heaven. He was at it in the time of the Caesars, he was at it in Mahomet’s<sup>19</sup> time, he was at it in the time of the Inquisition, he was at it in France a couple of centuries, he was at it in England in Mary’s day,<sup>20</sup> he has been at it ever since he first saw the light, he is at it today in Crete—he will be at it somewhere else tomorrow. The higher animals have no religion. And we are told that they are going to  
160 be left out, in the hereafter. I wonder why. It seems questionable taste. **D**

Man is the Reasoning Animal. Such is the claim. I think it is open to dispute. Indeed, my experiments have proven to me that he is the Unreasoning Animal. Note his history, as sketched above. It seems plain to me that whatever he is, he is *not* a reasoning animal. His record is the fantastic record of a maniac. I consider that the strongest count against his intelligence is the fact that with that record back of him, he blandly sets himself up as the head animal of the lot; whereas by his own standards, he  
170 is the bottom one.

In truth, man is incurably foolish. Simple things which the other animals easily learn he is incapable of learning. Among my experiments was this. In an hour I taught a cat and a dog to be friends. I put them in a cage. In another hour I taught them to be friends with a rabbit. In the course of two days I was able to add a fox, a goose, a squirrel, and some doves. Finally a monkey. They lived together in peace, even affectionately. **E**

19. **Mahomet’s:** Muhammad (c. 570–632) was an Arab prophet whose teachings formed the basis of Islam.

20. **in Mary’s day:** during the reign of Queen Mary (1553–1558), who was given the nickname “Bloody Mary” because she ordered the deaths of many Protestants.

**D** LITERARY FOCUS

Underline an example of **irony** in this paragraph. Why is this ironic?

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**E** LITERARY FOCUS

Is the information in this paragraph an example of **exaggeration**? Why or why not?

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**A** **READING FOCUS**

What do you think is Twain's **purpose** for including this paragraph?

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180 Next, in another cage I confined an Irish Catholic from Tipperary, and as soon as he seemed tame, I added a Scottish Presbyterian from Aberdeen. Next a Turk from Constantinople, a Greek Christian from Crete, an Armenian, a Methodist from the wilds of Arkansas, a Buddhist from China, a Brahman from Benares. Finally, a Salvation Army colonel from Wapping. Then I stayed away two whole days. When I came back to note results, the cage of Higher Animals was all right, but in the other there was but a chaos of gory odds and ends of turbans and fezzes and plaids and bones and flesh—not a specimen left alive. These Reasoning Animals had disagreed on a theological detail and carried the matter to a higher court. **A**