From The Damned Human Race by Mark Twain

DO NOW: Read the following background info about Mark Twain.

Mark Twain is a central figure in American literature. The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, his finest work, is the story of a journey down the Mississippi by two memorable figures, a white boy and a black slave. Twain was born Samuel Langhorne Clemens in 1835 and was raised in Hannibal, Missouri. During his early years, he worked as a riverboat pilot, newspaper reporter, printer, and gold prospector.

Twain had a darker side that may have resulted from the bitter experiences of his life: financial failure and the deaths of his wife and daughter. His last writings are savage, satiric, and pessimistic. The following selection is taken from Letters from the Earth, one of his last works. It has been under the title The Damned Human Race and has been printed in numerous essay anthologies.

ACTIVATOR: Do you think today’s news features headlines about people fighting somewhere in the world? Name a conflict you have heard about happening in the world today.

In the following selection, Mark Twain concludes that the combative and cruel nature of human beings makes them the lowest of creatures, not the highest. With scathing irony, he supplies a startling reason for humans’ warlike nature.

The Damned Human Race by Mark Twain

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 my allegiance to the Darwinian theory of the Ascent of Man from the Lower Animals; since it now seems plain to me that the 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.

1. What is Darwinian theory?
In proceeding toward this unpleasant conclusion I have not guessed or speculated or conjectured, but have used what is commonly called the scientific method. That is to say, I have subjected every postulate 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 course in its turn before advancing to the next. These experiments were made in the London Zoological Gardens, and covered many months of painstaking and fatiguing work.

2. What does “satire” mean? How is Twain using satire in the paragraph above?

3. What is an “earl”?

Some of my experiments were quite curious. In the course of my reading I had come across a case where, many years ago, some hunters on our Great Plains organized a buffalo hunt for the entertainment of an English earl. 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 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.

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 to cheat the ignorant and the helpless out of their poor servings in order to partially appease 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 chicane. 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.

4. Based on the paragraph above (paragraph 4), what do you think “avaricious” and “miserly” might mean?

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

5. What is a “harem”? What is a “concubine”?

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

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 living 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 is the Animal that Blushes. He is the only one that does it or has occasion to.

6. In your own words, describe what the terms “indecency,” “vulgarity,” and “obscenity” mean.

At the head of this article we see how three monks were burnt to death a few days ago, and a prior 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 prisoners’ eyes; when he is King John, with a nephew to render
untroublesome, he uses a red-hot iron; when he is a religious zealot dealing with heretics in the Middle Ages, he skins his captive alive and scatters salt on his back; in the first Richards time he shuts up a multitude of Jew families in a tower and sets fire to it. 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 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 dig out its eyes, or tear off its skin, or drive splinters under its nails); 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.

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 and help to slaughter strangers of his own species who have done him no harm and with whom he has no quarrel.

7. What, according to Mark Twain, is the “atrocity of atrocities”? Explain.

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.

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 mans slave for wages, and does that mans 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.

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. The higher animals have no religion. And we are told that they are going to be left out, in the Hereafter. I wonder why? It seems questionable taste.
8. What, according to Mark Twain, is the “true religion”? (be careful when you answer)

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.

Next, in another cage I confined an Irish Catholic from Tipperary, and as soon as he seemed tame I added a Scotch 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.

9. What two things is Twain comparing in the above paragraphs and for what purpose?

One is obliged to concede that in true loftiness of character, Man cannot claim to approach even the meanest of the Higher Animals. It is plain that he is constitutionally incapable of approaching that altitude; that he is constitutionally afflicted with a Defect which must make such approach forever impossible, for it is manifest that this defect is permanent in him, indestructible.

In fact, [this Defect] manifestly is a disease. Rabies is bad, but it is not so bad as this disease. Rabies enables a man to do a thing, which he could not do when in a healthy state: kill his neighbor with a poisonous bite. One is the better man for having rabies: Rabies is an innocent disease, compared to this [Defect]. What now, do we find the Primal Curse [that caused this Defect] to have been? Plainly what it was in the beginning: the infliction upon man of the Moral Sense; the ability to distinguish good from evil; and with it, necessarily, the ability to do evil; for there can be no evil act without
the presence of consciousness of it in the doer of it.

10. What, according to Twain, is the “Defect” of humanity?

And so I find that we have descended and degenerated, from some far ancestor (some microscopic atom wandering at its pleasure between the mighty horizons of a drop of water perchance) insect by insect, animal by animal, reptile by reptile, down the long highway of smirch less innocence, till we have reached the bottom stage of development (namable as the Human Being). Below us, nothing

WRAP UP: What is Mark Twain’s purpose in writing this essay? What message is he sending about humanity?

“Damned Human Race” Open Response Prompt:

Based on the excerpt, describe the major flaws of humanity. Support your answer with relevant and specific information from the text.