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SAMUEL BUTLER'S *ERNEST PONTIFEX, OR THE WAY OF ALL FLESH*: EVOLUTION,
RELIGION, AND WEALTH

by

CARLA MILLS

Under the Direction of Paul Schmidt

ABSTRACT

In *The Way of All Flesh*, published posthumously in 1903 but written during the years 1873-1884, Samuel Butler presents his Victorian world as one in crisis, unhinged by recent scientific developments. Charles Darwin published *The Origin of Species* in 1859 and effectively undercut most religious and theological belief structures with his argument that all species evolved gradually over time from a common ancestor. If this is so, how could the Bible's story of creation be true? Samuel Butler incorporates terminology of evolution and develops his own evolutionary views in response to Charles Darwin's throughout the novel. Butler's protagonist, Ernest Pontifex, exemplifies the evolutionary process in a bildungsroman-style text to implicitly suggest Butler's belief that man cannot successfully adapt to his environment without wealth. Indeed, wealth can be seen as a sort of religion for Butler's protagonist, replacing the position God formerly held as that which was to be worshipped.

INDEX WORDS: Samuel Butler, Evolution, *The Way of All Flesh*, Charles Darwin, Wealth, Victorian Period

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CARLA MILLS

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2014

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by

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August 2014

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my family, who supported, encouraged, and believed in me always: my husband, Scott; my four children, Brigham, Emma, Joseph, and Logan; my mother, Evelyn Blevins, whose work ethic inspired, motivated, and ultimately stood me in good stead; and my father, Carl Blevins, who died before he could know of this work but whose legacy of belief in my ability kept me always mindful of the task at hand.

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INTRODUCTION

In the spring of 1873, Samuel Butler began writing *Ernest Pontifex, or The Way of All Flesh* (Howard, Intro. v). In *The Way of All Flesh* Butler incorporates terminology of evolution and presents his own evolutionary views developed in response to Charles Darwin's after reading *The Origin of Species*. Butler's classic Victorian novel describes the "three generations of Pontifexes" preceding Ernest's in addition to Ernest's (Bissell 293). Butler subjects his protagonist, Ernest Pontifex, to the evolutionary process in a bildungsroman-style text to demonstrate the failure of Darwin's premises and ostensibly to suggest Butler's own. However, Ernest only successfully evolves (adapts) when money enters the equation. Subjecting Ernest to such external stimuli and allowing him to survive the subjection allows Butler to assert his own views on the institutions of family, marriage, church, and friendship as well as to apply his own views on how the evolutionary process proceeds in human behavior. Astonishingly enough, although his protagonist survives intense environmental stimuli, I believe Ernest fails to successfully adapt (if success is determined by vocational independence and the ability to support himself) on his own merit. Rather, Ernest muddles along until an unexpected influx of money allows him to finally stand on his own two feet. Butler ultimately suggests that even if freed of the constraints of family, marriage, religion, and social pressures, man cannot succeed without wealth.¹

Samuel Butler was born in 1835. His life saw the tremendous changes, social, religious, and scientific, that occurred during the Victorian period. Butler's contributions to English literature necessarily reflect these momentous changes (arguably even crises). In 1872, he published *Erewhon*, his "first major book . . . and the only one, apart from the posthumously

¹ The topic of wealth invites a Marxist reading and would be developed if the scope of the paper permitted. However, given the constraints of this thesis, I have not here considered how Marxist ideology may be related to the novel but will save that discussion for a later time.

published *The Way of All Flesh*, to achieve lasting popularity” (Jedrzejewski 416). He began *Ernest Pontifex, or The Way of All Flesh*, in the spring of 1873². G.D.H. Cole in his text *Samuel Butler* states that Butler began the novel almost as soon as he finished *Erewhon*, and Butler “worked at it intermittently, and with long intervals between the spells of activity, until 1884. Thereafter he did no more to it” (22). The novel was not published until 1903, after Butler’s death.

Cole calls attention to the reason why the book’s setting is significant; his comments bear heavily on my assertion that wealth is a necessary condition for Butler’s view of evolution. Cole says “the fictitious narrator, Overton, is supposed to have written it, except for the last chapter, in or about 1867, as a man in his early sixties, thirty years Butler’s senior” (22). Most importantly, the

entire atmosphere of the narrative belongs to a particular time, and that a time with a very peculiar quality of its own. The years between 1850 and the middle ‘seventies have often been called the ‘golden age’ of British capitalism. They were years when wealth not only accumulated fast in the hands of the upper and middle classes, but also began to filter down to the upper strata of the working classes and even, in smaller measure, to the great majority of the people.” (22)

As we shall see later, this “golden age” perpetuated Butler’s interest in wealth as a necessary condition for his existence. Darwin’s *Origin of Species* was published in 1859, and Butler read it avidly while he was pursuing his independence as a sheep farmer in New Zealand in 1860.

When he began reading the text, “it took him by storm,” and Butler later said to J.B. Yeats that

² Daniel Howard gives a full timeline of Butler’s life, including all his publications, on pages xxvii-xxviii of the version of the novel he edited: *Ernest Pontifex, or The Way of All Flesh*. Ed. Daniel F. Howard. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin; 1964. Print.

Darwin's text had "completely destroyed his belief in a personal God"³ (Willey 63). Initially Butler admired Darwin greatly, but he quickly became aware that Darwin's theories as presented in the *Origin of Species* were incomplete, even "grossly defective," and he began revising them with his own ideas (Goodhue 312).

Religion appears throughout *The Way of All Flesh*. The title *The Way of All Flesh* presumably can be read as an allusion to the Biblical verse of Genesis 6:12: "And God looked upon the earth, and behold, it was corrupt: for all flesh had corrupted his way upon the earth" (*King James Version 1611*). Butler invokes the religious disillusion, or to go further, corruption, prevalent in the Victorian society with this title. It suggests that all humanity is corrupt, cannot escape that corruption, and thus must either evolve (adapt) to the surroundings, or they will be in need of some form of saving grace. What will that saving grace be? Will the protagonist of the novel find such a balm? And if so, will it be a religious one? Ultimately, Butler discards family, marriage, religion, and friendship, substituting money as God. He suggests that man is best served by relying on his own instincts, but only the possessing of wealth will actuate successful adaptation to his world.

³ Here Basil Willey cites the essay "Recollections of Samuel Butler" in John Butler Yeats' text *Essays Irish and American*, 1918.

More than one version of the novel Samuel Butler's *Ernest Pontifex, or The Way of All Flesh* exists. The version of the text I am using is edited by Daniel F. Howard. Mr. Howard claims this version is much more faithful to Butler's authorial intentions than the initial version that was published in 1903 by R.A. Streatfeild, Butler's friend and first literary executor. Because Butler withheld publication of *Ernest Pontifex, or The Way of All Flesh* until after his death, he never knew that Streatfeild made significant changes to his manuscript, changes that were discovered by Mr. Howard upon later examination of the original manuscript. Therefore, I have chosen to use the 1964 text, as in my opinion it represents the best critical edition of this novel. With the permission of Butler's literary executors, the American scholar Daniel F. Howard undertook to go back to Butler's manuscripts held in the British Museum. He found fascinating stuff. Howard says that Butler's authorial intentions are clear from the manuscripts: Butler marked each title page as "Revised, finally corrected and ready for the press without being further looked at" (Howard, Intro. xxiii). However, because Butler worked on the manuscript over the period of "more than eleven years, from 1873 to 1884: he revised passages, cut up old pages, added new ones, and changed the position of many chapters," Howard claims the manuscript was a mess (xxiii). Howard believes that the "untidy, unfinished-looking manuscript" must have led Butler's first literary executor, R.A. Streatfeild, to make "substantial changes of his own at many points and minor changes on every page" (xxiii). Incredibly, "for sixty years[,] readers have seen not what Butler left but Streatfeild's version of what he left" (xxiii)! Not only did Streatfeild make many significant changes, but he was also not careful to point out his changes in a note on the text. As a textual critic, then, Streatfeild did not honor Butler's authorial intentions. Howard presents the actual manuscript Butler wrote in its original form, with "nothing . . . silently omitted or added except an occasional mark of punctuation

which the sense demands” (xxiii). Howard asserts that “[r]eaders will sense at once . . . a livelier, more informal style, full of the colloquialisms that Butler naturally used” (xxiii).

Therefore, I believe this text to be the most authorial version and am relying on it for all primary source textual references.

As mentioned already, the principle of Darwinian evolution runs throughout Samuel Butler’s *The Way of All Flesh*. Butler “was to feel as sharply as any man the impact of the new wave of religious doubt that Darwin’s book set in motion; and to him, as to many others, this one issue for a long time seemed to overshadow every other” (Cole 24). Butler presents his own voice through the “elderly and philosophically-minded [narrator Edward] Overton, who is both an actor in the plot and a spokesman for the author’s ideas” (Bissell 280). Butler subjects his novel’s protagonist, Ernest Pontifex, to an evolutionary process; various external pressures and stimuli (most notably those of his Victorian parents and his religion) act upon him as the novel progresses, and Ernest finds himself actively engaged in a struggle to survive the manifold abuses his world presents to him. Indeed, this Victorian world is responsible for his predicaments: it is a world unhinged by recent scientific propositions, and Butler’s novel emerges from this momentous age as witness to the quandaries with which many people struggled.

Ernest discovers that he can best proceed alone, without hindrance from external agents such as his parents impinging upon him (and thereby Butler anticipates the modern age in literature by some twenty-odd years). David Guest claims that Butler is “an important transitional figure between the age of Victoria and the age of modernism (283). I would like to suggest that Ernest cannot indeed mature successfully in this Victorian middle-class environment until he receives a surprise inheritance. Indeed, Butler’s “psychological and fictional works

serve as a prelude to the trauma and (self)-destruction portrayed in modernist literature. His rendering of isolation, however, need not be deemed harmful . . . seclusion, alongside trauma, enables one to utilize free will and escape the deadening effects of church and family” (Neilsen 79-80). Butler need not be read as a modernist for purposes of this paper; however, although Butler straddles the literary eras, he portrays a positive view of isolation as beneficial when one is entrapped by the Victorian church and family.

Butler’s evolutionary thought pervades the novel, and many critics have read the novel as illustrative of Butler’s own ideas. As Bissell mentions in his essay entitled “A Study of *The Way of All Flesh*,” “R.A. Streatfield, Butler’s literary executor, pointed out in an introductory note that the novel was ’to a great extent contemporaneous with *Life and Habit*, and may be taken as a practical illustration of the theory of heredity embodied in that book’” (Bissell 278). Bissell goes further to suggest that Butler’s “scientific ideas were . . . inseparable from a moral philosophy that could find its fullest expression . . . in the literary form that deals most directly with problems of human conduct, the novel” and that *The Way of All Flesh*, then, “is Butler’s attempt to give artistic embodiment to a moral philosophy that grew out of a scientific theory” (278). Bissell believed that “morals and science were never sharply separated in Butler; if he approached the study of science with something of the fervor of the moralist, he examined moral ideas with something of the detachment and clear-sightedness of the scientist” (288). Clara Stillman claims in her book *Samuel Butler, a Mid-Victorian Modern* that Butler believed that “poverty and wealth have a profound spiritual significance” (8). She further suggests that Butler’s “biology was a bridge to a philosophy of life which sought a scientific basis for religion and endowed a naturalistically conceived universe with a soul,” and she refers to Butler as primarily a philosopher (9). Indeed the novel articulates Butler’s “moral philosophy,” and

indeed evolutionary ideas can be traced through the novel, but I would further suggest that the possession of (or acquisition of) wealth lies at the heart of that moral philosophy. Butler mocks the society that believes evolutionary processes alone can determine one's success.⁴ G.D.H. Cole asserts that Butler, although an "acute critic . . . of many Victorian values . . . was very much a Victorian himself. . . . No one ever insisted more firmly than Butler on the Victorian virtue of having enough money to live on securely in a comfortable *bourgeois* way" (9). Indeed, Butler himself wrote in his *Notebooks* as follows: "Money is the last enemy that shall never be subdued. While there is flesh there is money - or the want of money; but money is always on the brain so long as there is a brain in reasonable order" (36).

Critics have certainly said that *The Way of All Flesh* reflects Butler's rejection of Darwinistic views on evolution, but I believe that, in addition to articulating Butler's own evolutionary stance, Butler has also interpreted the Darwinian evolutionary treatise in a social context, showing a Victorian protagonist trapped within an economic social strata, one which he is powerless to transcend on his own merits. He requires the assistance of others better positioned culturally, socially, and economically than he in order to extricate himself from more than one unfortunate dilemma. He also requires the advent of a significant monetary inheritance to become confident enough to do what he is drawn to do – to write. Without this assistance, he would have been unable to survive in the manner he does. Ernest's writing fails to satisfy the masses; although his first book succeeds beyond his wildest dreams, every text that follows falls short of his initial literary promise. Because Ernest is rich already from his inheritance and does not require business success to live, he retorts as follows when Overton tries to gently guide him in a better literary direction:

⁴ Bissell also points out that Butler began to write *The Way of All Flesh* while he was "deep in the exposition of his own theory of evolution" (278).

‘What can it matter to me,’ [Ernest] says, ‘whether people read my books or not? It may matter to them—but I have too much money to want more, and if the books have any stuff in them it will work by-and-by. I do not know nor greatly care whether they are good or not. . . . Some people must write stupid books just as there must be junior ops and third class poll men. Why should I complain of being among the mediocrities? If a man is not absolutely below mediocrity let him be thankful—besides, the books will have to stand by themselves some day, so the sooner they begin the better.’ (Butler, *Way* 355-56)

Ernest’s faithfulness to write what he wants to write is admirable. His ability to do so is ultimately occasioned by his inheritance rather than income produced by his own literary merits.

DARWIN’S EVOLUTIONARY BELIEFS AS BACKGROUND FOR SAMUEL

BUTLER’S RESPONSE

Charles Darwin’s *The Origin of Species*, published in 1859, shook the foundations of religion and science and called into question the tacit assumption of religious belief. It was “a major event in Victorian thought and the history of ideas. It dealt a severe blow to traditional teleology” (Goodhue 108). It ruined the ability for some Victorians to become believers. They were assailed with doubt: “many traditional views of design and purpose were shaken severely by Darwin’s book” (Goodhue 107). According to Darwin, man and animals (the “species”) evolved gradually over a long period of time and are still evolving. Environment plays a selective role in that evolutionary process, and some organisms evolve more successfully than others. At the time Butler began to write his own “whimsical essays on evolution for the New Zealand Press” in 1860, Darwin’s earth-shattering treatise was but a few months old and had thoroughly “fascinated” Samuel Butler (Howard, Intro. xxvii). It will be instructive first to

consider Darwin's basic premises and then turn to Butler's before taking up the subject of how Butler's novel reflects the scientific and social mores of its time.

Goodhue provides a particularly concise summary of Darwin's theory in his dissertation, *A Study of Samuel Butler's Contribution to the Theory of Evolution*. He posits three points as follows:

- (1) Existing species undergo ceaseless variation, when producing offspring, without apparent known scientific cause,
 - (2) Variations which happen, by chance, to be better adapted to meet changed conditions of existence will survive whereas those which are not so well adapted will perish. Those that survive will produce offspring similar to themselves and consequently the "chance" of benevolent adaptation will be perpetuated. Darwin called this process natural selection; . . . and (3) Variations near the extreme edges of the spectrum of variability will demonstrate, over a period of time, a better tendency to survive and fill out the polity or niches of nature. Darwin called this process "divergence."
- (Goodhue 101-02)

Darwin here fails to address the actual origin, or cause, of the variation, an omission that greatly bothers Samuel Butler. Basil Willey states that Samuel Butler, "Darwin's implacable foe, was only expressing a misgiving felt by many others (including Darwin himself) when he complained that Darwin's book had been misnamed, since the *origin* of species was precisely what had been left unexplained" (24). Also, "the Darwinian explanation, in 'banishing mind from the world,' and replacing the living will by a dreary, endless accumulation of lucky accidents, was no explanation at all" (Grendon 279).

According to Darwin's principle of natural selection, ". . . many more individuals of each species are born than can possibly survive; and . . . consequently there is a frequently recurring struggle for existence" (Darwin, *Origin* 103). Several factors are important to the theories of natural selection and survival of the fittest. Instinct and the "nature of the organism and the nature of his conditions" are just a few (Darwin, *Origin* 105). The "nature of the organism" is "much the more important [of the two]" (Darwin, *Origin* 105). Darwin's theory of evolution has direct implications for individual and collective Man. Strong individuals will survive, and feeble ones will not: "Let the strongest live and the weakest die" (Darwin, *Origin* 208). Presumably, the man with the strongest instinct will emerge victorious in the survival struggle: "No one will dispute that instincts are of the highest importance to each animal" (Darwin, *Origin* 208). Also, natural objects acquire instincts "under domestication . . . partly by man selecting and accumulating" (Darwin, *Origin* 189). Interestingly, however, Darwin acknowledges that instincts are not always perfect (Darwin, *Origin* 208). The ways in which Ernest Pontifex responds to his external conditions and relies on his instinct will influence his development.

BUTLER'S EVOLUTIONARY BELIEFS IN RESPONSE TO DARWIN'S

Samuel Butler had such strong opinions on the subject of evolution that he wrote and published several books on the subject. Douglas James Goodhue's dissertation, *A Study of Samuel Butler's Contribution to the Theory of Evolution*, contains much helpful summary information on the Butlerian evolutionary texts. Goodhue begins with a summary of Butler's work: Butler "wrote four books and several more articles on the theory of evolution . . . [in which he] attempted to delineate the defects in the *Origin of Species* and to repair them with a purposive explanation of the evolutionary process" (1). Butler, through those writings, "drew attention to what he considered to be defects in Charles Darwin's theory of evolution

(particularly its failure to explain the origin of variations)” (Goodhue, Abstract 1). Because “*The Way of All Flesh* (1903), Butler’s posthumously published novel, was written and rewritten while Butler was writing these books,” Glenn Carey argues in a 1964 article, “Samuel Butler’s Theory of Evolution: A Summary,” that “[r]esultantly, the novel also expresses Butler’s theory of evolution” (Carey 231). Carey’s article only mentions Butler’s novel this one time, its point being rather to flesh out his evolutionary views.

In the opening lines to *Luck, or Cunning?* Butler begins his discussion on the “two main points on which have been insisting for some years past[:] . . . the substantial identity between heredity and memory, and the reintroduction of design into organic development” (Butler, *Luck* 13). Danielle Neilsen examines Butler’s text *Life and Habit* for his initial evolutionary arguments, and she identifies Butler’s reliance on “the early nineteenth-century studies of Jean Baptiste de Lamarck and later nineteenth-century conceptions of memory, habit, and evolution” as he develops his own “new theory of the transmission of habits, memories, and instincts not only in humans, but in all forms of life – plant and animal” (Neilsen 82). Butler posits that “ancestral memory” is a “connection with all other life through a biological memory that creates ‘unity’ among organisms” (82). This ancestral memory for Butler is what determines an individual’s own personality and ability to survive (82). Neilsen quotes from G.D.H. Cole⁵, saying that “‘personality was not a private, mental possession: it was continuous through the ages from generation to generation’” as she concludes that for Butler, “inherited, practiced habits and instincts form the most important basis of personal identity” (83). The way in which individuals change, or lose their ancestral memories, is through traumatic experiences. Butler explains that “adaptation to trauma is purposeful For both Butler and Lamarck, when the body adapts, it must be in relation to a specific cause with forward, evolutionary progress toward

⁵ G.D.H. Cole, *Samuel Butler*, Denver: Alan Swallow, 1948, 27.

perfection” (84-5). Neilsen also identifies Butler’s statement from *Life and Habit* that “purposeful adaptation occurs only when ‘unfamiliar objects, or combinations . . . produce their effect . . . by one hard blow’⁶” (85). Essentially, trauma can serve as a catalyst for adaptation in Butler’s evolutionary theory.

Dame Gillian Beer, in her text *Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, mentions Samuel Butler’s evolutionary interests several times. She claims that the “crisis of ideas” occasioned by Darwin’s *Origin* had earlier antecedents: “as Samuel Butler was soon and irascibly to point out, the work of earlier development theorists such as Buffon, Lamarck, and Erasmus Darwin” preceded Charles Darwin’s evolutionary claims (11). She also claims in her Preface to the second edition of the above-mentioned text that “Samuel Butler . . . saw the problem implied: in human affairs, biological evolution takes place across another evolutionary form, that of cultural memory. Through record and language, through tools and machines, futures are built and change is released – though at the same time the process is understood as settling society and grounding knowledge” (Beer xx). She also states that “Darwin was seen by Samuel Butler, George Bernard Shaw, and others, as the man who banished mind from the universe. Natural Selection gave no place to self-help by the individual organism, nor indeed much survival value to memory, especially across generations, whether human or held within other life forms” (Beer 243). Several times she mentions Butler, and in the notes to this comment, she raises the controversy that existed between Samuel Butler and Charles Darwin by citing a text dealing directly with the quarrel: Basil Willey’s *Darwin and Butler: Two Versions of Evolution* (London 1960). According to Beer, Butler’s issue with Darwin was based on Butler’s conviction that Charles had plagiarized the ideas of his grandfather Erasmus Darwin (Beer 268). Another subject Beer raises is Samuel Butler’s interest

⁶ Neilsen here quotes from Butler’s *Life and Habit* (1878; London: Wildwood, 1981), page 152.

in the role of memory. Charles Darwin also “speculate[d] on the possibility that memory may travel across separated generations” (Beer 247). Darwin wrote about their shared beliefs as such, which is quoted here from Beer’s text but originally obtained from page 292 of Charles Darwin’s text *The Voyage of the Beagle*, introduction David Amigoni (Ware, Hertfordshire, 1997): “Now if memory of a tune & words can thus lie dormant, during a whole life time, quite unconsciously of it, surely memory from one generation to another also without consciousness, as instincts, are is not so very wonderful” (Beer 247, 281). Butler’s own peculiar exploration of the role of memory will be outlined in the next section.

Goodhue notes that Butler “always sought a purposive theory of evolution” (26). Butler did not accept Darwin’s explanation of how variation in organisms occurred. His “recognition of the flaws in Darwin’s theory and his alternate theory of hereditary memory as a purposive explanation of evolution” form the basis of the sixth chapter of Goodhue’s dissertation, and I will draw on the material in that chapter to explain Butler’s ideas (27). In that chapter, Goodhue claims that Butler basically determined there were “two kinds of variation: one arose from chance or accident, and the other arose from the necessity of the organism to vary in the face of circumstances” (Goodhue 299). Most of Butler’s “argument is in favour of the second kind of variation, that which is purposive or cunning” (299). If we apply the notion of cunning, or the organism’s need to vary given its particular circumstances, to Ernest in *The Way of All Flesh*, what we discover is that Ernest’s variations never quite succeed. Every time he meets up with a circumstance that requires him to change, the changes he chooses to make fail to improve his situation in life (with the possible exception of his “cutting,” or ceasing to have anything further to do with, his parents). The message Butler sends, then, appears to be contradictory to his evolutionary notion unless one has monetary wealth.

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN DARWIN'S AND BUTLER'S EVOLUTIONARY IDEAS

Butler's ideas differed significantly from Darwin's. Claude Bissell summarizes Butler's ideas as follows: "[t]he evolutionary process is a gradual and almost imperceptible growth; a too violent cleavage with the past means disaster, and usually, death. Such a theory of evolution could not be reconciled with Darwinism. Where Butler 'vitalized' nature, Darwin saw it as an impersonal force expressing itself according to mechanical laws" (Bissell 283). Clara Stillman says that Butler "accepted natural selection as one of the factors of evolution, but it seemed to him totally inadequate as a main means of variation, and furthermore it did not even pretend to explain the *origin* of variation, the power to vary which had to exist in every creature for natural selection to work on" (Stillman 119). Butler attempted to demonstrate the way in which variation originated with his theory that memory was the main way in which heredity was transmitted. Stillman summarizes the process "by saying that offspring are a continuation, an extension of the personality of their parents, and so of the primordial cell . . . 'We are all one animal'"⁷ (123). Darwin had claimed that external forces operate on the creature. Basil Willey, in *Darwin and Butler: Two Versions of Evolution*, quotes from the last chapter of Darwin's *Origin of Species* to explain the operation of external forces: "'species have been modified, during a long course of descent. This has been effected chiefly through the natural selection of numerous successive, slight, favourable variations; aided in an important manner by the inherited effects of the use and disuse of parts; and in an unimportant manner . . . by the direction action of external conditions'" (Willey 13). Butler almost completely reverses Darwin's ideas by asserting

⁷ Stillman here quotes from Butler's own work, although the citation is not given at this point in her text. The information can be found in a letter Butler wrote to Thomas William Gale Butler dated February 18th, 1876, contained in *The Notebooks of Samuel Butler*, edited by Henry Festing Jones. See Stillman's discussion of the process in the "Life and Habit" chapter of her 1932 text *Samuel Butler: A Mid-Victorian Modern*.

that “[i]ntelligence and will are thus identified with the life force and become the main factor in the evolution of life” (Stillman 125). Stillman’s summary of Butler’s theory, “reduced to its simplest terms,” runs as follows:

The main points on which this theory rests are then: identity of personality between parents and offspring; memory on the part of the offspring of certain actions done in the persons of its ancestors, which means that heredity is a form of memory; the latency of this memory until aroused by associated ideas, and the unconsciousness with which habitual actions come to be performed, the sense of need when faced with slightly changed conditions, and the transmission of acquired characters. (125)

Essentially, we are our ancestors, but we have made small adaptations along the way in response to our specific needs. In *Erewhon*, Butler makes clear that selection occurs from within the organism. Goodhue claims that the Erewhonians “divest[ed] selection of its power . . . assum[ed] that power themselves . . . to attain complete mastery of life *Erewhon* is the *Origin of Species* written from the point-of-view of the organism” (129). Is this position not simply a reversal of Darwinian principles? I believe Butler here mocks Darwin’s removal of the individual from its destiny, suggesting as he does that all adaptation is predicated on chance, whereas Butler’s theory retains some individual control over purposive evolution.

ANALYSIS: EVOLUTIONARY IDEAS IN *THE WAY OF ALL FLESH*

Evolutionary notions pervade the narration of *The Way of All Flesh*. Danielle Neilsen claims “the novel is deeply rooted in Butler’s own philosophical and evolutionary epistemologies” (Neilsen 82). Because Butler “wanted a view of life in which the diverse needs of man’s nature should be harmonized, a world in which the struggle for self-knowledge and

personal freedom should constitute not an act of rebellion but an inevitable growth, in harmony with natural and social laws,” he begins to imagine the world that would become his novel, *The Way of All Flesh* (Stillman 127). Butler’s protagonist, Ernest Pontifex, becomes a doubting Victorian. Because of external evolutionary pressures impinging upon his very existence,⁸ and because of the precarious condition in which Darwin had placed religion, Ernest finds that his struggle to survive, begun at birth and accelerated in his twenty-second year, cannot admit religion as an assuaging help to him. He turns, both unconsciously and consciously, to a behavior which repeated shocks to his person have conditioned in him: much as Darwin suggests will happen in his revolutionary treatise, Ernest begins to rely upon his instinct as the guiding principle of his life instead of the religion he has been immersed in since childhood. In the words of William Shakespeare’s famous “Sonnet 116,” instinct becomes for Ernest, the “star to every wandering bark,/Whose worth’s unknown, though its height be taken” and replaces religion in Ernest’s life (7). Ernest’s substitution of instinct as a guiding principle for life explicitly and implicitly posits him within a Darwinian evolutionary context. Most of what it says to do is unhelpful, except when his instinct tells him to “cut” his parents, to make a complete break with them, and accordingly Ernest does so.

In the novel, Butler presents a protagonist whose sorrows begin with his conception, as did Tristram Shandy’s: “My Tristram’s misfortunes began nine months before he ever came into the world” (Sterne 6-7). Ernest’s parents believe their duty is to “begin training up their children

⁸ Gillian Beer states in the Preface to *Darwin’s Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Fiction* that “the study of science in relation to literature . . . is now a highly productive seam at the critical coalface and producing some outstanding work” (Beer xxv). She also claims that “It took a century before the discovery of DNA demonstrated the organism as a structural narrative programmed to enact itself through time. Evolutionary ideas proved crucial to the novel during that century not only at the level of theme but at the level of organization. At first evolutionism tended to offer a new authority to orderings of narrative which emphasized cause and effect, then, descent and kin” (Beer 6). Perhaps the notions of evolutionary cause and effect she mentions prompted Samuel Butler to explore how a fictional protagonist who exhibited many similarities to Butler’s own personal circumstances might respond to shocks to his environment.

in the way they should go, even from their earliest infancy” (Butler, *Way* 117). Filial independence must be avoided: “[t]he first signs of self must be carefully looked for, and plucked up by the roots at once before they had time to grow” (Butler, *Way* 117). Theobald begins to teach Ernest to read at two years’ of age. Unfortunately, Theobald “began to whip him two days after he had begun to teach him” (Butler, *Way* 120). Theobald begins to exert external stimuli upon Ernest early in childhood.

Ernest’s father, Theobald, conditions his son (in the Darwinian sense) at such a young age that the boy is incapable of individual action or original thought; Theobald controls Ernest from the beginning. Therefore, if the nature of the organism is more important than the nature of his conditions, then it appears that Ernest’s nature is sadly deficient, since he has no nature that can be termed solely his own. Of course, the powerless Ernest cannot control his environment; Theobald rigorously supervises the young Ernest until he reaches school age, then Theobald chooses Roughborough as Ernest’s new habitat. It is no accident that the name of Ernest’s new environment is Roughborough; Ernest indeed finds it to be a “rough” second “borough” (or home). Ernest suffers through a “tortured existence” while a schoolboy at Roughborough (Bissell 298). His home life as a child at Battersby had been no better. Ernest was “battered” by his father from age two on at Battersby. The very name Battersby “conjures up violence” (Daniels 14). Even his mother, Christina, hails from another town which name, Crampford, “suggests narrow-mindedness and bigotry” (Daniels 14). Ernest finds himself “roughed” up at Dr. Skinner’s Roughborough. Until he reaches Cambridge, Ernest does not find an environment even slightly conducive to his personal needs. These environments serve to modify Ernest’s instinct, or the “action which we ourselves require experience to enable us to perform” (Darwin,

Origin 184). Ernest evolves and changes in response to his experiences at home, Battersby, and Roughborough.

Overton, a friend of the Pontifex family who narrates the text, observes of typical Sundays at the Theobald Pontifex home: “I was there . . . and observed the rigour with which the young people were taught to observe the Sabbath” (Butler, *Way* 123). Ernest’s early development damages him. Again, according to Overton, “[W]hatever a man comes in contact with in any way forms a cross with him which will leave him better or worse, and the better things he is crossed with the more likely he is to live long and happily” (Butler *Way* 129). Ernest’s contacts are not happy ones, and he struggles through an unhappy childhood into an unhappy young adulthood. His environmental stimuli seem too strong for the boy who was “still feeble” and who “At thirteen or fourteen . . . was a mere bag of bones . . . appear[ing] to have no strength nor stamina” (Butler, *Way* 113).

During Ernest’s tenure at Roughborough, Ernest continues to feel the stirrings of instinct within him, yet he does not know how to act upon them. School vacations at home are the worst for Ernest. Most explicitly, during the dining room interview with his father regarding the watch Ernest gave to Ellen but which Theobald later discovers in a pawn shop, Ernest feels “as near an approach to an instinct to turn as one so defenceless could be expected to feel” (Butler, *Way* 205). However, still a youngster, Ernest fails to assert any self will when overpowered by his father’s domineering manner. Interestingly enough, yet another interview in the dining room takes place before Ernest returns to school. This time, Theobald wishes to severely limit his son’s income in order to encourage Ernest to deserve more “merit money,” and he discovers many things about Ernest’s expenditures that are not to his liking (Butler, *Way* 208). When pressed for details, Ernest yields information that implicates him and other schoolboys. Overton

says, “I doubt how far any both could withstand the oral pressure which was brought to bear upon him; at any rate, he could not do so, and after a little more writing he yielded himself a passive prey to the enemy” (Butler, *Way* 210). Again, Theobald controls Ernest’s environment. Even though Theobald must do his fathering at this point *in absentia*, he can and does define several elements of his son’s environment. He heartlessly inflicts great pain on Ernest by making him tattle on others. Theobald must do more than merely punish his own child; he must also reprimand every other sinner, turning them also away from the paths of evil.

While Ernest lives at Roughborough, his Aunt Alethea takes a personal interest in him and moves to be near him. She decides to encourage his development positively because she “want[s] someone to leave her money to” (Butler, *Way* 165). Danielle Neilsen remarks in “Samuel Butler’s *Life and Habit* and *The Way of All Flesh*: Traumatic Evolution” that Alethea “was able to show Ernest that a different life exists outside of the seemingly miserable one he experiences at Battersby and Roughborough. Alethea befriends Ernest, moves near the school, and surrounds him with the most studious and well-rounded schoolboys” (Neilsen 89). She also encourages Ernest to find a hobby as an outlet. He accordingly begins learning carpentry. Before long, he begins constructing an organ. No wonder Ernest’s work on the organ is so beneficial: he loves music. When she tells him “about her grandfather and the organs he had built,” Ernest immediately adopts the idea and begins work (Butler, *Way* 170). Working on the organ provides a positive outlet for Ernest to vent his frustration.

An interesting coincidence here is the pun Butler constructs with the word *organ*. An organ is, in the scientific sense, a component of all advanced life forms. Ernest metaphorically constructs a building block of life. He engages with utmost ardour in creating this subunit of a larger organism. Merely fourteen, Ernest works at perfecting his organ, and this work gives

meaning to his life. Perhaps Theobald also works on his own version of an organ: he “long since developed the organ by means of which he might vent spleen with least risk and greatest satisfaction to himself. This organ, it may be guessed, was nothing less than Ernest” (Butler, *Way* 183). Just as Ernest’s organ is an extension of himself, a means of releasing frustration and creating something pleasurable to serve him, so Ernest functions as an extension of Theobald, who molds Ernest in his own attempt to achieve satisfaction. It should be evident which of the two engages in the healthier activity; of course Theobald could do lasting harm to Ernest, but Ernest stands little chance of harming the organ itself. Butler’s word play on *organ* is interesting, indeed, and it plays into a Darwinian interpretation of the novel.

Shortly hereafter, Aunt Alethaea dies. Her death serves as a major setback for Ernest. She has, “[i]n all aspects,” been “different from any family members Ernest encounters. She nurtures while others abuse; she shares her wealth while others hoard it; she rejoices in an irreligious life while the church controls Theobald and Christina” (Nielsen 89-90). Nielsen astutely points out that Alethaea’s “efforts show Ernest how to love, experience happiness, and live outside the limits of religion, asceticism, and obedience that Theobald, Christina, and George fostered even if he does not know how to achieve this lifestyle” (90). Alethaea acts on Ernest’s behalf in death just as she did in life: she leaves him virtually everything in her will: “She would leave £15,000 to Ernest—which by the time he was twenty-eight would have accumulated to, say, £30,000” (Butler, *Way* 146). Overton is to hold the money in trust until Ernest is of age to receive it. Alethaea set that age at twenty-eight. Nielsen argues that it is Alethaea’s death and the concomitant loss of the organ-building project that causes Ernest’s first major trauma; Theobald refuses to allow Ernest to continue with the project. Here Nielsen

identifies the “first trauma that [Ernest’s] memories are not prepared to reconcile because not one of his ancestors lost something they loved so dearly” (Neilsen 90).

Oblivious about his Aunt’s bequest, finally Ernest graduates from Roughborough and matriculates at Cambridge, intending to carry out his father’s desire that he become a clergyman. At Cambridge, Ernest enjoys modest success when he publishes a radical essay in the school magazine. Ironically, his first real success among his peers only occurs when Ernest comes “of age, and Theobald had handed him over his money, [giving] . . . him . . . an income of £250 a year” (Butler, *Way* 229). Soon thereafter, a sermon by Mr. Hawke propels Ernest along the road to ordination: “Ernest felt now that the turning point of his life had come. He would give up all for Christ” (Butler, *Way* 249). Vainly Ernest convinces himself that perhaps he could be of some great stature someday through his modest clergyman’s efforts, and he actively pursues ordination. After ordination, Ernest discovers that he is “appalled by the irrevocable nature of the step which he now felt that he had taken much too hurriedly” (Butler, *Way* 254). Clearly, the pressure Theobald exerts upon Ernest affects his son’s choice of vocation; Ernest is much too obedient a child to resist this external pressure upon his being.

Disillusioned, Ernest reaches a major turning point in his life. He faces a religious crisis for the first time. Will he regain his faith, or will he find another substitute? Ernest will not have to make this decision for himself. Just as all of Ernest’s previous decisions have been either made for him or aided and abetted by some other external, environmental force, this decision is assisted also: fate intervenes. Wrongly imprisoned shortly after his ordination, Ernest realizes that he “loathed . . . the life he had been leading ever since he had begun to read for orders . . . [and] . . . rejoiced at what had befallen him” (Butler, *Way* 302). This sounds almost like the Apostle Paul, who gives thanks for all things (even imprisonment): “in all things, give thanks”

(New American Standard Bible, 1 Thessalonians 5:18). Unfortunately, Ernest does not have the Pauline gratitude. Instead, Ernest begins to read the Bible simply as “one who wish[es] neither to believe nor disbelieve, but care[s] only about finding out whether he ought to believe or no . . . he s[ees] plainly enough that . . . the story [of the Resurrection] could not now be accepted by unbiased people” (Butler, *Way* 302). Ultimately, Ernest’s soul searching while imprisoned leads him to reject religious faith. What, then, will replace faith as Ernest’s guiding principle? What will be the wandering and adrift Ernest’s guiding star?

Much as Darwin suggests, Ernest begins to rely on instinct to guide him once he rejects religion. For example, as he leaves prison, Ernest encounters his parents who wish to reconcile with their poor, fallen son. Ernest follows his instinct, which tells him to cut his parents: “a warning voice within told him . . . that if he was clean cut away from them he might still have a chance of success, whereas if they had anything whatever to do with him, or even knew where he was, they would hamper him and in the end ruin him” (Butler, *Way* 315). The warning voice he heeds is his instinct—his primary resource in his struggle to survive. Religion would never allow such filial disobedience; clearly, religion is no longer Ernest’s guiding principle. Religion appears to be one of the environmental stimuli that threaten to crush Ernest, and Ernest ultimately removes the threat by simply refusing to affirm such a belief structure any longer. Finally, Ernest begins to trust his own desires and partially define (by changing or adapting to) his environment.

Has Ernest now realized a measure of self-reliance or independence? Self-reliance is perhaps the most important feature Ernest lacks. Can he now “insist on [himself], never imitate” in the words of an American thinker contemporary with Butler (Emerson 906)? Is Ernest now

cognizant of his true, inner self? According to one critic, V.C. Knoepfmacher, Ernest has achieved a conversion of sorts, from false self to true self:

Ernest's reconversion to his 'true self' is depicted in three separate stages. The first stage portrays Ernest at Battersby and at Roughborough as the victim of the heritage introduced by George Pontifex. The second stage depicts the adolescent at Cambridge and in London, where he is imposed upon by a succession of false prophets. Still misusing the changed 'conditions of his existence,' Ernest finally succumbs to a crisis which illustrates the insufficiency of his training. In the third stage of his career, Ernest finally tries to unlearn the false habits of the past two generations. This final schooling produces Ernest's misguided marriage, but ends 'tolerably well' with a 'pontifex' who can build a bridge from the past into the future. (279)

To argue against Mr. Knoepfmacher, Ernest does not develop in three separate stages, and he does not achieve a "reconversion to his 'true self'" (Knoepfmacher 279). Instead, he continually finds a substitute figure to rely on for support, and when the novel ends, Ernest's future remains uncertain.

First of all, to distill Ernest's experience into three stages is erroneous. Ernest undergoes a continual process of change and discovery that is not clearly demarcated into three stages. Rather, Ernest's stages of discovery are as follows: the child at Battersby, the schoolboy at Roughborough, the young collegiate at Cambridge, the ordained clergyman in London, the fallen soul in prison, the post-prison survivor and husband to Ellen, the ex-husband of Ellen and bachelor manager of Overton's money, and the financially independent but spiritually dependent Ernest who receives his aunt's money and occupies himself writing literature. Ernest's

development thus appears to be of a strongly evolutionary and recursive nature: the stages of Ernest's maturation are not clearly outlined; indeed, the transitions are blurry at best. Darwin's own treatise on evolution and the origin of species asserts that "the accumulative action of Selection" is a "predominant power," whether it is "applied methodically and quickly, or unconsciously and slowly" (Darwin, *Origin* 113). Ernest's childhood at Battersby was so damaging that it is not until Ernest completes his prison term that he is able to begin to heal most of the emotional wounds inflicted upon him by his father. Therefore, even in his post-Battersby years, he still labours under much of the pain instilled in him by his father. His development is indeed recursive.

Yet another two-fold point of Mr. Knoepfmacher's that appears flawed is "Ernest's reconversion to his 'true self' . . . ends 'tolerably well' with a 'pontifex' who can build a bridge from the past into the future (Knoepfmacher 279). First, Ernest never achieves an understanding of his "true self." Ever since his childhood, Ernest has idolized somebody within his acquaintance. Along with an implicit idolization of Christ, instilled in him by his father, he also idolizes his parents (although not for long), Ellen, his aunt, his friend Towneley, the elder curate Pryer, Ellen again as his wife, and finally Overton. His tendency toward idolatry stems from a profound desire for affection and love; Ernest was "naturally of an even temper, he doted . . . on kittens and puppies, and on all things that would do him the kindness of allowing him to be fond of them" (Butler, *Way* 117). Ernest's hunger for affection probably results from the absolute want of affection and love characteristic of his Battersby childhood. Remember, at the tender age of two, Ernest's education begins: "Theobald . . . began to teach him to read . . . [and] to whip him two days after" (Butler, *Way* 120). Even the brutal Theobald serves Ernest as an early idol.

Also, it is not proven within the text of *The Way of All Flesh* that Ernest ever achieves a “true self.” What is patently clear is that Ernest does become a whole person (as nearly as possible given his emotional scars resulting from the battleground of his youth). However, Ernest appears to have adopted Overton as a “substitute parent” (Knoepfmacher 263). Is he not still idolizing Overton as a father figure? It is also not clear how Overton fits into Ernest’s revised religious ideology. Overton, Ernest’s godfather, may actually be acting as a “father God” to Ernest. He never interferes unless necessary or practical for the good of Ernest, his creature. He allows Ernest to fend for himself until he inevitably gets into trouble, evoking Aunt Althea’s earlier words: “it is an unusually foolish will, but he is an unusually foolish boy” (Butler, *Way* 177). Overton sees that the “foolish will” is executed properly and keeps its contents secret from Ernest; he here deliberately withholds knowledge, but he has Ernest’s best interests at heart. Overton wisely refrains from stepping too abruptly into Ernest’s life, a shock that may be so strong to the boy’s environment that it could ruin him forever. Furthermore, and most significant, was not Overton “asked to be Ernest’s second ‘godfather?’” (Butler, *Way* 106). Overton indeed appears to be the second “God” the “father” figure in Ernest’s life. When the first God fails Ernest, the God of his own father, Theobald, Ernest forsakes religion as being of any practical use to a reasonable man: “he saw plainly enough that . . . the story [of the Resurrection] could not now be accepted by unbiased people” (Butler, *Way* 302). As Ernest’s second God the Father (godfather), Overton replaces the spiritual father figure of Christ as well as the biological father Theobald.

Ultimately, Ernest’s development proceeds recursively throughout the novel. By the end of the novel, Ernest has still not become self-reliant. At so many stages along the way, Ernest suffers setbacks sufficient to abort his successes achieved by that point. He begins again each

time, almost like a species that resorts to a lower life form in evolutionary renewal and rebirth. Many instances serve as attacks on his fragile form: letters from Theobald, the death of his aunt and resultant cessation of his organ-building project, wrongful imprisonment, and the shock of his wife Ellen's alcoholism all serve to undermine Ernest's faith in worldly sources of strength. Also, each person he idolizes is eventually proven to be something less than Ernest once believed. Ernest attempts to turn inward in a search for strength and realizes some of his own power (perhaps even all of it), but Overton's presence makes Ernest's complete dependence on himself, and by extension Ernest's complete independence, unnecessary. Overton steps in as the father God figure, replacing Ernest's biological father. Ernest thus never finds his true self but continues to define his identity in relation to a father figure until the end of the novel. Presumably Ernest will cast around him in search of another such figure; maybe he will be able to fend for himself. Who knows? A strong presumption remains that Ernest will continue to idolize until the end of his life, if not a living person, then at the very least, the memory of Overton—the one person who never failed Ernest. Ernest cannot relinquish his faith in that bulwark of a man.

THE RELIGIOUS DILEMMA: VICTORIAN ANGST AFTER DARWIN AND BUTLER'S RESPONSE

Religion appears throughout *The Way of All Flesh*, and in many places, it appears mixed up with money. But first, a word on Butler's theology:

it amounted to a sort of Pantheism. It was closely connected with his view of human personality, which in turn was linked to his doctrine about inherited memory. . . . He considered personality to be continuous between parents and children, and in effect between all living things. . . . Butler had a profound respect

for the religious sentiment whenever he could find it divorced from mumbo-jumbo, and a profound disrespect for every scientific theory that seemed to him to dethrone the mind-stuff that was his idea of God. Out of this arose his search for a theory of evolution that should give mind, or will, or ‘trying,’ the central place in the scheme of things. As soon as he had lighted on such a theory the religious question was settled, for him, and it never troubled him again. (Cole 64-5)

He had “lost his faith in orthodox Christianity, and had discarded all belief in its miraculous element, [but he] remained a Theist” (Cole 62). Because religion caused Butler such personal conflict for a time, it was certain to appear in his novel.

In many places in *The Way of All Flesh*, Butler states that man cannot serve God and Mammon too. Mammon is defined as “material wealth or possessions, especially as having a debasing influence” (M-W Online). In the very first reference to God and Mammon, in Chapter 5, Butler claims that George Pontifex, Ernest’s grandfather, had a good bit of wealth: “Money came pouring in upon him, and the faster it came the fonder he became of it, though . . . he valued it not for its own sake, but only as a means of providing for his dear children. Yet when a man is very fond of his money it is not easy for him at all times to be very fond of his children also. The two are like God and Mammon” (Butler, *Way* 20). A bit later in that same chapter, Butler intensifies the comparison to metaphor. Children are equated with money in the description that follows, and I quote the entire section to demonstrate the extended metaphor:

George Pontifex felt this as regards his children and his money. His money was never naughty; his money never made noise or litter, and did not spill things on the tablecloth at meal times, or leave the door open when it went out. His dividends did not quarrel among themselves, nor was he under any uneasiness lest

his mortgages should become extravagant on reaching manhood and run him up debts which sooner or later he should have to pay. There were tendencies in John which made him very uneasy, and Theobald, his second son, was idle and at times far from truthful. His children might, perhaps, have answered, had they known what was in their father's mind, that he did not knock his money about as he not infrequently knocked his children. He never dealt hastily or pettishly with his money, and that was perhaps why he and it got on so well together. (Butler, *Way* 20)

Here Butler again almost idolizes wealth over family. Money would behave far better than children would. Is it, then, what the Victorian fathers and mothers consider superior, even to the children created from their own bodies?

The next reference to mammon appears in Chapter 19. Overton claims in his narrative voice that "We cannot 'serve God and Mammon'; 'strait is the way, and narrow is the gate' which leads to what those who live by faith hold to be best worth having, and there is no way of saying this better than the Bible has done" (Butler, *Way* 75). In Chapter 25, Butler has Christina assert through a letter she wrote to her two sons that she intended for delivery after her death (if she should die):

[*God*] says you cannot serve *Him* and Mammon. *He* says that strait is the gate that leads to eternal life. Many there are who seek to widen it; they will tell you that such and such self-indulgences are but venial offences—that this and that worldly compliance is excusable and even necessary. The thing *cannot be*; for in a hundred and a hundred places He tells you so—look to your Bibles and seek there whether such counsel is true—and if not, oh, 'halt not between two

opinions,' if God is the Lord follow *Him*; only be strong and of a good courage, and He will never leave you nor forsake you. Remember, there is not in the Bible one law for the rich, and one for the poor—one for the educated and one for the ignorant. To *all* there is but one thing needful. *All* are to be living to God and their fellow-creatures, and not to themselves. *All* must seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness—must *deny themselves*, be pure and chaste and charitable in the fullest and widest sense—all, 'forgetting those things that are behind must press forward towards the mark, for the prize of the high calling of God.' (Butler, *Way* 94)

Ernest's mother here implores her two sons to follow religion, not Mammon. All people must seek God first, denying all else. Christina claims the rich and the poor are subject to the same laws, to live to God and fellow humans, not to selfish concerns. For her the choice is a clearly delineated either-or proposition: either one follows God, or one follows Mammon. If one follows Mammon, then, does it become the god being worshiped?

There's just one problem. In Christina's world, religion reigns supreme. With the generational gap between her world and her son Ernest's world, Samuel Butler reflects the deeply divisive moment in time when Charles Darwin's evolutionary text forever changes the Victorian landscape of belief. Those who believe the world and its creatures were created in the manner given by the Bible must question that belief now that science has postulated an alternative method of creation radically opposite from the creationism of the Bible. This new premise brought forth by Darwin claimed that "species had not been formed once and for all in one creative act or in a series of such acts; that they were not immutable, but had evolved by natural processes from a few simple primordial forms or from one. . . . [I]t was . . . the most

daring, and the most subversive of both scientific and theological orthodoxy” (Willey 11). Butler comes of age in a world that is questioning the foundational premises of religion, and Ernest’s struggles with religion reflect the struggles of the world and of the time in which Butler is writing. Therefore in Ernest’s world, the fictional world Butler creates, that mandate ceases to be such a strong two-way proposition. Instead, the religious way has lost some of its appeal, diminishing in power after Darwin’s evolutionary treatise suggests an alternative method for why and how the world came into being.

This is the world in which Samuel Butler found himself. For Butler, religion had certainly been called into question. He stated in his own personal writings, “To put one’s trust in God is only a longer way of saying that one will chance it” (Butler, *Notebooks* 223). While I would certainly not presume to suggest that Butler was not religious, it is clear that he saw the world divided between the religious and the scientific. Consider this passage from his *Notebooks*:

Let automata increase in variety and ingenuity till at last they present so many of the phenomena of life that *the religious world* declares they were designed and created by God as an independent species. *The scientific world*, on the other hand, denies that there is any design in connection with them, and holds that if any slight variation happened to arise by which a fortuitous combination of atoms occurred which was more suitable for advertising purposes (the automata were chiefly used for advertising) it was seized upon and preserved by natural selection. (289, emphasis mine)

This passage occurs in the section of his *Notebooks* devoted to material he was considering for his text *Erewhon Revisited*, and no doubt Butler intended to use it to further his discussion about

machines. My main point rests with his delineating the separation of the scientific world from the religious world and his setting them in opposition to each other. A choice now existed: people could make one or the other, but it might now be impossible to subscribe to both ideologies, given how radically different they were. Butler made a note to the effect that only the “amiable and sensible people” could live in both worlds: in a section entitled “Science and Religion,” he remarks “these [science and religion] are reconciled in amiable and sensible people but nowhere else” (Butler, *Notebooks* 36). Given Butler’s “irascible” personality, he likely considered few people amiable and/or sensible (Beer 11)! Indeed, Butler goes even further to question “Is there any religion whose followers can be pointed to as distinctly more amiable and trustworthy than those of any other? If so, this should be enough. I find the nicest and best people generally profess no religion at all, but are ready to like the best men of all religions” (Butler, *Notebooks* 35). For Butler, it wasn’t necessary to practice the religion in order to accept those who were religious.

Butler’s novel reflects this struggle with faith as Ernest initially becomes ordained but then casts off religion during his stay in prison. He read with the intention of “finding out whether he ought to believe or no” (Butler, *Way* 243). The text demonstrates Ernest’s recognition that he simply could not retain his faith:

[Ernest] saw plainly enough that, whatever else might be true, the story that Christ had died, come to life again, and been carried from earth through clouds into the heavens could not now be accepted by unbiassed people. It was well he had found it out so soon He would probably have seen it years ago if he had not been hoodwinked by people who were paid for hoodwinking him. What should he have done, he asked himself, if he had not made his present discovery till years

later when he was more deeply committed to the life of a clergyman? Should he have had the courage to face it, or would he not more probably have evolved some excellent reason for continuing to think as he had thought hitherto? Should he have had the courage to break away even from his present curacy?

He thought not, and knew not whether to be more thankful for having been shown his error or for having been caught up and twisted round so that he could hardly err farther, almost at the very moment of his having discovered it. The price he had had to pay for this boon was light as compared with the boon itself. What is too heavy a price to pay for having duty made at once clear and easy of fulfilment instead of very difficult? He was sorry for his father and mother, and he was sorry for Miss Maitland, but he was no longer sorry for himself. (Butler, *Way* 243-44)

Ernest's world thus differs radically from his mother Christina's world, and Ernest makes a choice that Christina could likely never make. He casts off religion, determining to make his own way in the world.

THE MONEY DILEMMA: A NECESSARY PRECONDITION IN BUTLER'S VIEW OF EVOLUTION

References to the word "money" in *The Way of All Flesh* occur two hundred and thirty-seven times. There are twenty-eight references to the word "rich," and interestingly enough, the word "wealth" occurs just once. Clearly, Samuel Butler's novel deals with the topic of money, and I believe the reason Butler fixates on money so heavily exemplifies his conviction about money's importance to one's survival, or adaptation, to his environment. Douglas Goodhue points out that "Butler lived in a society that thought wealth and power were identical, and

worshipped both; he saw their social importance in a world impressed with Darwinian evolution on the one hand and with power, energy and thermodynamics on the other. Butler made brief notes on the significance of wealth in his early essays” (Goodhue 130). According to G.D.H. Cole, Butler’s own personal money difficulties made him “ashamed” (Cole 55). Cole identifies Butler as “[in] revolt . . . against many aspects of the Victorian gospel [but] thoroughly at one with that unspoken article of the Victorian creed which laid down that lack of money is the root of most, if not of all, evil. Love of money became for [Butler] . . . one of the cardinal virtues” (55). Butler came from a wealthy family. His father was “well-to-do, and had every prospect of being rich when he came into a large property to which he, and his children after him, had a legal reversion” (51). I will trace Butler’s treatment of money throughout the text to show its importance to the characters and determine its ancestral relation to Ernest in order to demonstrate Ernest’s ultimate reliance upon wealth as a condition of his social adaptation.

The first reference to money occurs early in the first chapter and, as such, underscores the notion that money will be a substantial theme in the text. This first entry, the first sentence of the second paragraph, establishes that old Mr. Pontifex’s wife “was said to be his master” and “brought him some money” upon their marriage, although the narrator doubts the amount was very much (Butler, *Way* 3). Here Butler introduces the theme of money as windfall through dowry or inheritance. Old Pontifex was a carpenter and maintained a shop in one of the outbuildings on his 90-acre farm property, which “stood on the site of the ruins of an old monastery” and also contained an “old-fashioned but comfortable house with a charming garden and an orchard” (4). Pontifex had become well-to-do enough such that he was no “longer compelled to work with his own hands” and was free to draw and play the organ, which he built with his own hands (3-4). The narrator for the story is Edward Overton, and Edward’s father

tells Edward at a young age that old Pontifex was one of the “very ablest men I ever knew” (6). Therefore, Edward grows up impressed with Pontifex’s talents.

Old Pontifex and his wife finally brought forth a son together after some fifteen years of marriage. The son was named George, and at the age of fifteen, George was apprenticed to his uncle, Mr. Fairlie, who owned a publishing business in London. George worked hard, visited his parents occasionally, and, “[l]ike his father, knew the value of money” (Butler, *Way* 10). Here is the second reference to money; not surprisingly, Butler explicitly asserts that money is to be valued in this reference. The boy grew up, became a partner with Mr. Fairlie in the business when he was twenty-five, and at thirty-two he married a lady with a “handsome dowry” (10). Only a “few years” after becoming a partner, Mr. Fairlie and his wife both died. George inherited the publishing business and a “fortune of some £30,000 . . . a large sum in those days” (19-20). George was rich, and although the business was quite profitable, most of his riches came through inheritance.

Butler’s narrator makes another comment about inheriting money shortly into chapter 6 when he says “those who are born inheritors of money” are independent of their parents for support, a state greatly to be desired given Butler’s own personal situation. For some years, Samuel Butler was dependent upon an allowance from his father of £300 per annum, as long as Samuel gave none of it to Charles Paine Pauli, a friend he had been supporting since returning from New Zealand with him (Stillman 187). Butler met Pauli in Christchurch, New Zealand, in September of 1863 (Raby 92). According to Raby, Pauli was Butler’s “most significant new friendship, one that was to cramp his life for over thirty years” (92). Pauli was “two and a half years younger” than Butler and was well-dressed, well-educated at Winchester and Oxford, attractive, and charming (92). What was not to like about Pauli? Butler viewed himself as

“plebian in appearance and . . . more plebian in tastes that I probably in reality was,” Butler wrote in 1897, some thirty-four years after his initial meeting with his new friend (92-3). Butler supported Pauli for some thirty-odd years until Pauli died in 1898, with the exception of the time Butler was dependent upon his father for the £300 per year allowance until Canon Butler finally agreed to disentail the Whitehall family estate over indiscretions committed by Samuel’s brother Tom in order to better provide for Tom’s family.⁹ Once this step had been taken, Butler could “raise capital on the security of the estate” and once again “assume responsibility for his own affairs,” no longer needing an allowance from his father (Raby 186-88). Finally, as a forty-five year old man, Samuel became financially autonomous, though the conditions of this independence relied upon income from what was essentially to be his inheritance. Butler himself cannot evolve successfully until he acquires this money.

No doubt Butler’s own personal situation influenced the vignette he describes in *The Way of All Flesh* where George Pontifex indulges himself by threatening his five children with the threat of being disinherited. Later in Chapter six, when “not quite well [George] would have them in for the fun of shaking his will at them” (Butler, *Way* 24). Theobald, Ernest’s father, was one of those five children so threatened. Theobald thus grew up believing that such holding of one’s inheritance over the head of a child was a commonplace occurrence, and his parenting of Ernest shows influences of such “will-dangling” and “will-shaking” as George threatened when out of temper (24). In Chapter eight, Butler again raises the issue of money as the twenty-three-year-old Theobald expresses reservation over his imminent ordination, feeling quite concerned that he was not suitable to become a man of God. He writes a letter to his father, expressing his

⁹ This long and somewhat sordid story about Samuel’s brother Tom and his exploits is not relevant to this paper and won’t be related here. Details may be found in the “Friends and Relations” chapter of Peter Raby’s text *Samuel Butler: A Biography*. Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 1991. Print.

feelings as follows: “my conscience tells me I should do wrong if I became a clergyman” (32). George reassures Theobald that such doubts are normal, but when Theobald responds with a more strongly worded refusal to enter the church and choose another profession, George’s response cuts Theobald to the bone: “You shall not receive a single sixpence from me till you come to your senses. Should you persist in your folly and wickedness, I am happy to remember that I have yet other children, whose conduct I can depend upon to be a source of credit and happiness to me” (33). Perhaps the result of such a communication can be predicted: Theobald was “ordained in the autumn of the same year, 1825” (34). Again, the family inheritance was threatened, and the child forbore to do the right thing by his parent, and not necessarily by himself. Theobald became, for better or for worse, a clergyman: Theobald’s own adaptation to his environmental stimuli fails to work in Theobald’s favor. George Pontifex lived until he was seventy-three years old; when he died, Theobald inherited £17,500 (73). Theobald will live comfortably from this point on, because he was always scrupulously careful with money: he had an “unimpeachable integrity” where his financial affairs were concerned (46).

Theobald and his wife, Christina, had three children, and Ernest, the first-born, receives a small inheritance of £2,500 upon his birth as a gift from his grandfather George. This amount will nearly double before Ernest actually receives it in hand, but more on that later. Ernest goes off to school when he is twelve years old. Suffice it to say that Ernest fails to follow in his father’s “unimpeachable” footsteps with regard to money matters. The earliest reference to Ernest’s management of money at school occurs in Chapter thirty: he was “perfectly free with whatever little money he had” (Butler, *Way* 114). However, his inner “true self,” that “other Ernest that dwelt within him and was so much stronger and more real than the Ernest of which he was conscious . . . persuaded with inarticulate feelings too swift and sure to be translatable into

such debateable things as words,” but it spoke to him, giving him “bad advice about his pocket money” and other matters (115-16). The monthly merit money at Roughborough amounted to at most “four shillings and sixpence but by the age of fourteen, “Ernest never [merited] more than half a crown and seldom more than eighteen pence; his average . . . [was] about one and nine pence, which was just too much for him to rank among the downright bad boys, but too little to put him among the good ones” (117). Ernest thus “ekes” along with his pocket money, generally finding himself in arrears at the end of the month, owing a bit of money here, another little bit of money there, always failing to manage his childhood financial affairs well, ending up in the red at the end of the month (141). He “was not so careful about money as a pattern boy should be. . . . He [was] pretty well cleaned out a few days after he got back to school. When he had no more money, he got a little into debt Immediately he got any money he would pay his debts; . . . if there was not [any left over] – and there seldom was – he would begin to go on tick again” (160). Ernest’s mode of money management relied on the generosity of others to lend him money or advance goods to him, “probably to buy either music or tobacco,” and Ernest here reveals his inability to successfully manage his financial affairs (141).

While Ernest is a schoolboy, his Aunt Alethaea takes quite an interest in his welfare. She disapproves of her brother Theobald’s raising of Ernest and she determines to move closer to Ernest so that she can help him along. Somehow, she understands that Ernest’s development is not proceeding satisfactorily. After establishing a residence close by, she has him invite friends over, begin learning carpentry as a skill, and generally looks after his welfare in a manner that far surpasses his parents’ ability to do so. In her will, she left her money in trust for Ernest; he would receive it at twenty-eight. Alethaea believed that Ernest would probably foolishly waste the money, £5,000, he would inherit from his grandfather when he turned twenty-one. She knew

he must learn to manage money by losing it: “Let him make his mistakes . . . upon the money his grandfather left him. . . . I think he will have to lose the greater part or all of what he has, before he will know how to keep what he will get from me” (Butler, *Way* 132). She therefore determines the age of twenty-eight, thinking it will “take that boy many years to see things as his neighbors see them” (132). Ernest is not to know of this inheritance until he receives it, and Alethaea swears Overton to secrecy and appoints him the executor.

At Cambridge, Ernest proceeded happily enough, preparing to take orders as expected, presuming to use his grandfather’s legacy to purchase a living, as that legacy had “accumulated till it was now about five thousand pounds” (Butler, *Way* 173). That money would come to him at the age of twenty-one. His pocket money was set at £50 a year, an average sum for students in his university (174). While at university, Ernest “did has he had done at [Roughborough] – he spent what he could, soon after he received his money; he then incurred a few modest liabilities, and then lived penuriously – till next term, when he would immediately pay his debts, and start new ones to much the same extent as those which he had just got rid of” (174). Ernest continues to mismanage his pocket money. He has not inherited his ancestors’ prudent financial habits, a fault that will mandate fuller investigation in terms of Butler’s evolutionary ideas.

After graduating from Cambridge and being ordained, Ernest took a position as junior curate in “one of the central parts of London” (Butler, *Way* 200). The senior curate, Pryer, was twenty-eight and “passed generally for good-looking” although Overton despised him after merely meeting him once. Ernest, however, cultivated a friendship with Pryer, and before long Ernest was hanging on to every word Pryer uttered as gospel. Together they determined to found “an institution or college for placing the nature and treatment of sin on a more scientific basis . . . a college of Spiritual Pathology” (208). In order to increase Ernest’s money to have enough seed

money to found the college, Pryer suggests investing in stock. Ernest's letter to a friend reveals the plan's details: "Pryer suggests that as we . . . must get [enough money] by a judicious series of investments. Pryer knows several people who make quite a handsome income out of very little . . .by buying things at a place they call the Stock Exchange; I don't know much about it yet, but Pryer says I should soon learn;" (209). Ernest willingly complies. After Ernest makes a couple of novice investment mistakes, selling in a panic when the price fell low and not selling when shares gained in value, Pryer convinces Ernest to let him handle the investments. Ernest turns over the entirety of his £5000 inheritance from his grandfather into Pryer's care to be invested in the Stock Exchange. Butler describes Ernest as "uneasy" and indeed, the description is apt: "matters . . . had not gone too well with 'the things that people bought in the place that was called the Stock Exchange'" (216). As one might predict, Ernest never sees the money again. He has been taken in by a swindler. Perhaps Pryer's intention was never to swindle, but Butler never specifically addresses Pryer's character here; instead, Butler reflects Ernest's naiveté through the experience.

It is during Ernest's imprisonment when he discovers his money is gone. Overton reflects on Ernest's failure to comprehend the gravity of his loss, and indeed upon the importance of money in general, as follows:

Ernest was terribly shocked when he heard of the loss of his money, but his ignorance of the world prevented him from seeing the full extent of the mischief. He had never been in serious want of money yet, and did not know what it meant. In reality, money losses are the hardest to bear of any by those who are old enough to comprehend them.

A man can stand being told that he must submit to a severe surgical operation, or that he has some disease which will shortly kill him, or that he will be a cripple or blind for the rest of his life; dreadful as such tidings must be, we do not find that they unnerve the greater number of mankind; most men, indeed, go coolly enough even to be hanged, but the strongest quail before financial ruin, and the better men they are, the more complete, as a general rule, is their prostration. Suicide is a common consequence of money losses; it is rarely sought as a means of escape from bodily suffering. . . . Loss of money indeed is not only the worst pain in itself, but it is the parent of all others. Let a man have been brought up to a moderate competence, and have no specially; then let his money be suddenly taken from him, and how long is his health likely to survive the change in all his little ways which loss of money will entail? How long again is the esteem and sympathy of friends likely to survive ruin? Granted, then, that the three most serious losses which a man can suffer are those affecting money, health and reputation. Loss of money is far the worst, then comes ill-health, and then loss of reputation; loss of reputation is a bad third, for, if a man keeps health and money unimpaired, it will be generally found that his loss of reputation is due to breaches of parvenu conventions only, and not to violations of those older, better established canons whose authority is unquestionable. (Butler, *Way* 251)

Here Butler establishes the *prima facie* importance of money in his Victorian society. Money literally is arguably the most important ingredient to a man's health and social standing; a man can lose his health and survive but the loss of money can cripple one so intensely that he no longer wishes to live. Money is the crucial ingredient for successful environmental adaptation.

Butler includes much the same account of money's importance in his *Notebooks*. The phrasing even matches: compare this verbiage to the above section from the novel:

A man will feel loss of money more keenly than loss of bodily health, so long as he can keep his money. Take his money away and deprive him of the means of earning any more, and his health will soon break up; but leave him his money and, even though his health breaks up and he dies, he does not mind it so much as we think. Money losses are the worst, loss of health is next worst and loss of reputation comes in a bad third. All other things are amusements provided money, health and good name are untouched. (Butler, *Notebooks* 37)

Butler's thus incorporates his own beliefs about the crucial importance of money into *The Way of All Flesh* with Overton's comments, echoing as they do Butler's own musings, seemingly taken almost directly from his *Notebooks* and inserted into the novel.

While Ernest was serving his six-month prison sentence, he came to the conclusion that he must find a way to earn a living upon being released. He decided to become a tailor. Ernest spends the rest of his sentence working with the tailor learning the trade, and when released, makes his way to Overton's lodgings. Privately Overton, while unconcerned with the choice of trade, believed that Ernest would need overseeing for a time: "It was not enough that he should be able to cut out and make clothes—that he should have the organs, so to speak, of a tailor; he must be put into a tailor's shop and guided for a little while by someone who knew how and where to help him" (Butler, *Way* 268). Ernest pounds the pavement for several days, but he cannot find employment in a tailor's shop. Overton consults his own tailor, Mr. Larkin, and learns that "Ernest's plan [is] hopeless" (269). As Overton considers how to help his young charge, Ernest is simultaneously by chance encountering Ellen, his family's old housemaid, in

the streets. They share a meal, and during the brief time they dine together and then walk up Fetter Lane, Ernest makes up his mind to marry her. The narration explains, “before [Ernest] had got past the ham and beef shop . . . he had told Ellen that she must come home with him, and live with him till they could get married, which they should do upon the first day that the law allowed” (274). She, of course, agrees, not telling him that she has also spent time in prison and that she suffers from a predilection to drinking overmuch. But Ellen shows him a way out of his employment predicament: she suggests they go into business for themselves and “pointed out to him how he could earn a living” (274). Ellen works out the details: they will “take a little house in some small street . . . and let off the two top floors . . . keeping the back parlour and shop for themselves” (274). The house they found was in terrible disrepair, and the landlord loathe to fix much, but Overton, of course, stepped in and found “the money to do everything that was wanted . . . taking a lease of the house for five years at the same rental as that paid by the last occupier . . . [and] then sublet it to Ernest” (278). Once again, Ernest is saved from his downtrodden situation by others (and others’ money). Sally Shuttleworth, in her essay entitled “Evolutionary Psychology and *The Way of All Flesh*,” claims that Ernest’s “descent into poverty is carefully cushioned, of course, by Overton, who ensures he still has access to a piano and a room where he can write” (Shuttleworth 160). Ernest does give credit where credit is due; he “said it was all [Overton’s] doing and Ellen’s” (Butler, *Way* 279). Ernest and Ellen begin to operate a tidy little shop, becoming more successful “than Ernest had anticipated even in his wildest dreams”; Ernest now finds himself the proprietor of “a business which was bringing him in between four and five hundred a year, and which he understood how to extend” (283-84). Shuttleworth also points out Overton’s comment from page 301 of *The Way of All Flesh* about poverty being “very wearing . . . a quasi-embryonic condition through which a man had better pass if he is to hold his later

developments securely, but like measles or scarlet fever he had better have it mildly, and get it over early” (Shuttleworth 160). She goes on to claim that Ernest’s case is indeed “mild”; he “is reborn into a social environment where, thanks to his aunt’s money, his development is as carefully protected as his earlier life was doomed and defenceless” (160). Unbeknownst to him, Ernest will not be poor for long.

He and Ellen got along quite well for a time, but “[a]bout six months after he had set up his shop his prosperity had reached his climax” and he found Ellen in tears upon his return from attending sales; her speech was “incoherent” and Ernest wanted to call the doctor (Butler, *Way* 287). The truth (which Ernest does not realize) is that Ellen was drunk. She was also pregnant. Her fits continued, and Ernest’s business began to suffer because Ellen was “[keeping] back part of the proceeds in order to buy gin, and she did this more and more till even the unsuspecting Ernest ought to have seen that she was not telling the truth” (289). He finally realized his marriage was “a mistake” even though he “still did not know that his wife drank” (290). Finally Ernest learns the truth: a neighbor woman summons him because “Mrs. Pontifex is took with the horrors – and she’s orkard” (292). Ernest finds his wife “mad with *delirium tremens*” and now “knew all” (292). Ellen got better for a time, but she relapsed again, and Ernest refused to leave her, “talki[ng] nonsense about dying at his post” even though in Overton’s words Ernest was “not actually ill [but] he was overworked, below par, and unfit for further burden” (294). Thankfully, again circumstances released Ernest from his burden without his having to figure out a solution himself. As he returned home from making some purchases, he ran into the Pontifex family’s old coachman John, and in their ensuing conversation John told Ernest that he and Ellen were married (296)! John had “left her” after realizing he could not help her (297). Ernest “felt his burden removed”; he and Overton placed Ernest and Ellen’s two children in “the care of

[Overton's] laundress," and Overton, believing he needed to spare Ernest "the pain of another interview with his wife . . . got [his attorney] Mr. Ottery to manage the whole business" (296, 298). Again, Ernest is saved from his distress by someone else. He still needs assistance; he allows Overton and others to manage his affairs for him. Ernest still cannot yet manage his environmental stimuli on his own.

At this point, Ernest is twenty-six and would inherit his money from Aunt Alethaea in another eighteen months or so (Butler, *Way* 299). Overton believes it is time for Ernest to learn to keep books by double entry, and he offers Ernest a job as his "steward, bookkeeper, and the manager of [Ernest's own] hoardings – for so [Overton] called the sum which my ledger showed to have accumulated from £15,000 to £70,000 (303). Ernest still remains ignorant that this money belongs to him. He undertakes the job Overton offers, and Ernest now begins to learn to manage his very own money under Overton's guidance. Once again, Ernest receives significant assistance when he would have floundered miserably in place.

Ultimately Ernest begins to attempt to write, and after many rejections from publishers, he finally finds a bit of success. It might fail to surprise that Overton was, once again, heavily involved: "[a]t last after months of disappointment and many a tedious hour wasted in dingy anterooms (and of all anterooms those of editors appear to me to be the dreariest), he got a *bona fide* offer of employment from one of the first class weekly papers through an introduction I was able to get for him from one who had powerful influence with the paper in question" (Butler, *Way* 316). However, Ernest could not agree with what the editor wished him to do, and he essentially quit that job before he actually began it. Ernest knows the extent of his indebtedness to Overton: "What has being a gentleman ever done for me except make me less able to prey

and more easy to be preyed upon? It has changed the manner of my being swindled, that is all. But for your kindness to me I should be penniless” (317). Ernest goes on to state,

‘Will being a gentleman,’ he said, ‘bring me money at the last, and will anything bring me as much peace at the last as money will? They say that those who have riches enter hardly into the kingdom of Heaven. By Jove, they do; they are like Struldbrugs; they live and live and live and are happy for many a long year after they would have entered into the kingdom of Heaven if they had been poor. I want to live long and to raise my children, if I see they would be happier for the raising; that is what I want, and it is not what I am doing now that will help me.’
(317)

The time was quite near for Ernest to receive his inheritance. Finally, Ernest’s twenty-eighth birthday arrived, and Overton “was able to tell him all”; even so, it was “a long while before I could get him actually to believe that the money was his own” (317). He determines to continue with his writing, saying those things that “nobody else would dare to say” because he can do so safely without fear of lacking profit from his writings (337). Ernest believes it his “fate” to say them (337). For a while he “produced nothing” (341). When he did finally publish a book, it was “a series of semi-theological, semi-social essays, purporting to have been written by six or seven different people, and viewing the same class of subjects from different standpoints” (341). Perhaps my point will have already been deduced: once again, Ernest does not succeed by standing on his own two feet. He publishes anonymously. Overton believed that “[i]f Ernest had published this work in his own name I should think it would have fallen stillborn from the press” (344). However, perhaps due to its anonymity, Ernest’s initial foray into authorship became quite successful, and Ernest continued to write. He never experienced the same level of success

as he had with the first text, and that success was not attributable to Ernest's claiming the text under his own name. Again, Ernest fails to adapt successfully through any act of his own bodily organism; he retains a complete dependence upon others for his success. He "retires to live the ideal Butlerian life—one where a calm, passionless bachelorhood, and an ample income enable him to pursue a literary career of genteel unorthodoxy" (Bissell 301). Again, Ernest's and Butler's similarities can be noted: both are bachelors, both are writers, and both shun Ernest's family, with the exception of Aunt Alethaea, with whom Ernest was quite close.

Butler's ideas about the importance of wealth to successful evolution can also be seen in his earlier 1872 publication, *Erewhon*. In *Erewhon*, Butler's protagonist receives the harshest criticism available to one because of his poverty. Only an ill person would be more seriously condemned in this land of Nowhere (anagrammatically *Erewhon* but for the transposition of the "w" and the "h"). The protagonist has been asked to lodge with a known embezzler, who the "straighteners"¹⁰ say has made a "really wonderful recovery," but the protagonist objects on grounds that his potential host has embezzled money (Butler, *Erewhon* 97). As long as money "be got fairly," the protagonist claims about himself that "none can have a greater regard for money" (98). He assumes that to do so would "compromise [him] at the very outset in the eyes of all decent people" (98). His interpreter explained as follows: "'You *were* [poor] . . . and you were liable to be severely punished for it"; this host citizen was of the highest reputation in their society because of his wealth (99). In *Erewhon*, poverty was condemnable, but only slightly less

¹⁰ Butler defines a straightener in *Erewhon* as follows: "a class of men trained in soul-craft, whom they call straighteners, as nearly as I can translate a word which literally means 'one who bends back the crooked.' These men practise much as medical men in England, and receive a quasi-surreptitious fee on every visit. They are treated with the same unreserve, and obeyed as readily, as our own doctors—that is to say, on the whole sufficiently—because people know that it is their interest to get well as soon as they can, and that they will not be scouted as they would be if their bodies were out of order, even though they may have to undergo a very painful course of treatment" (*Erewhon* 107-08).

so than illness, which appeared to be the gravest crime of all. If anyone “fails bodily in any way before he is seventy years old, he is tried before a jury of his countrymen, and if convicted is held up to public scorn and sentenced more or less severely as the case may be” (107). Serious illness is punished more severely than minor illness by fines or imprisonment (with or without hard labor). To make matters even more nonsensical, *Erewhon* posits that “poverty and ill luck are also considered criminal” (107). Actual criminals are sent to the hospital and “most carefully tended at the public expense” or visited at home by fellow citizens, as the acts are the “result of either pre-natal or post-natal misfortune” (107). To be poor was quite an embarrassing condition.

In a recent article in *The New York Times*, William Gaddis writes that “[e]mbracing the principles of wealth as the measure of power, the millionaire as of greater benefit to society than the beggar and cunning as the guiding policy for all . . . exalt[s] Erewhon’s view of money” (Gaddis BR3). Indeed wealth claims its position as supremely important in Butler’s texts. In *Erewhon*, “for the first time Butler goes on to declare his admiration – so often expressed afterwards – for money and rich men. We all pay respect to wealth, and there is nothing in this to be ashamed of; it simply means that we are acknowledging a higher degree of evolution” (Willey 70). Wealth also confers power while at the same time delineating the qualities of survival:

Wealth, in Erewhon, is proof of an individual’s power over other men, and of the complexity of his organization; it is highly useful in a process where the fit survive and the unfit do not. Butler’s ideas of fitness are not tautological in the sense of ‘survival of the survivors,’ because he knows that selection is power and wealth is power. An increase in one is an increase in the other, so that the man with the greatest economic powers also holds the greatest selective powers.

Butler, living in a society that saw wealth as a natural phenomenon and not as a consciously-acquired characteristic, obtained great comic effect by revealing the interdependence of wealth and power and the consciousness with which both were, indeed, acquired. (Goodhue 130-31)

Goodhue's connection of wealth and power in *Erewhon* becomes equally relevant when analyzing *The Way of All Flesh*. The connection between wealth and evolution becomes clear here. A more highly evolved creature (human) will be wealthier than a less-successful organism. When these ideas are applied to Butler's later novel, *The Way of All Flesh*, Ernest demonstrates his ability to survive only when he attains wealth. But since Ernest does not earn the money on his own (to do so would be antithetical to Butler's beliefs about inheritance), he experiences variation through the external mechanism of his aunt leaving the money to him, and he now is free to ply his hand at writing whatever he wants to say, and what he has to say fails to satisfy the public. Butler claims in *The Way of All Flesh*, through Overton, that "with the public generally [Ernest] is not a favorite. He is admitted to have talent, but it is considered generally to be of a queer unpractical kind, and no matter how serious he is, he is always accused of being in jest" (Butler, *Way* 355). Unpopular, unsuccessful, but quite well-off, Ernest meets Willey's and Goodhue's definition of a more highly evolved specimen solely due to his wealth.

Jill Rubenstein, in "Business is Business: The Money Ethic of Samuel Butler," asserted wealth as the causative catalyst for Ernest's adaptation. She states that "[m]aterial success, then, like felicitous evolutionary development, becomes a tangible sign of the accumulated unconscious wisdom of generations. To transmit one's money intact to one's offspring is to contribute to progress . . . the accumulation of money . . . allows the human organism, "such as Alethea Pontifex and finally Ernest in *The Way of All Flesh*, to function independently"

(Rubenstein 241). She goes further to claim that Butler's emphasis on money as agent for evolutionary adaptation is "carried to the point of absurdity" (241). I disagree. Her claim is as follows:

Property becomes not merely acquisition but the meeting ground between self and non-self Despite flights of fancy, Butler's basic analogy between evolution and capital remains sound. One cannot help speculate that his lifelong concern with money and particularly with its connection to inheritance partially formed the theory of the continuous evolutionary personality. Butler's own circumstances continually reinforced the awareness that financial bequests are at least as important as genetic bequests in determining the bounds of one's life."
(241-42)

I agree that the inheritance is "important"; in fact, I would like to suggest that inheritance is so critically important to Ernest that without it, he would have been a social failure, dependent upon others for his survival, evolutionary heritage notwithstanding.

Rubenstein addresses the "seemingly insoluble paradox" that Butler at once praises money, seems to want to be recognized monetarily for his literary contributions, and outright condemns money as the "most fatal corruptor of music, literature, painting and all the arts"¹¹ (Rubenstein 243). Rubenstein sees Butler's money issue as not being the possession of money but the pursuit of money. Having money poses no problem. Earning money through the sales of one's artistic endeavors poses no problem. Pursuing money, however, in order to profit from the sale of one's works does pose a problem. Rubenstein states, "Butler fears not the presence of money but its pursuit" (243). She extends her analysis of money as the "catch-22 of his own

¹¹ Here she quotes Butler with a cite of XX, 170-71, which she footnotes as being from *The Shrewsbury Edition of the Works of Samuel Butler*, ed. Henry Festing Jones and A.T. Bartholomew (London: Jonathan Cape, 1926).

life” to that of “most Victorian thinkers and artists” but never develops how money relates to those other Victorians. Butler certainly values money, but Rubenstein only vaguely touches on its value as seen in his fictional texts. After stating that Butler, “always the realist, knew that both enjoyment and personal fulfillment inevitably require money,” she mentions the “ideal of the gentleman depends on this concept of well-endowed freedom” (244). Ernest’s admiration of Townley in *The Way of All Flesh* and Higgs’ admiration of the “high Ydgrunites” in *Erewhon* demonstrate Rubenstein’s conclusion that gentlemanly traits depend upon being accompanied by wealth (244). She also references the Simeonites of St. John’s at Cambridge, who appear to Ernest as the “gloomy, seedy-looking confrérie” as a result of primarily their poverty but who “retained the uncouthness of their origins” even when they have received scholarships (244). These Simeonites simply cannot overcome their poverty-ridden origins.

However, Butler’s prejudice here toward possessing money is clear: Rubenstein claims that “Ernest’s money gives him the intellectual and artistic independence which Butler regards as the sine qua non of truly creative work” (Rubenstein 243-44). Money engenders “full self-development” (244). Rubenstein articulates the value of money here to Butler, the author, and also shows that as long as one has money, but does not actively pursue the acquisition of money, one will be independent enough to, in essence, fully adapt to one’s surroundings, or successfully evolve (if one grants that the “full self-development” she mentions equates to evolutionary adaptive progress). Butler himself wrote the following about money in his *Notebooks*: “Let me assure any one who has money of his own that to write fearlessly for posterity and not get paid for it is much better fun than I can imagine its being to write like, we will say, George Eliot and make a lot of money by it [1883.]” (Butler, *Notebooks* 160). Butler also later wrote in the *Notebooks* that “it is curious that money, which is the most valuable thing in life, *exceptis*

excipiendis, should be the most fatal corrupter of music, literature, painting and all the arts. As soon as any art is pursued with a view to money, then farewell, in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred, all hope of genuine good work” (Butler, *Notebooks* 171-72).

This is the point that I further develop by analyzing just how much money actually means to Ernest: he flails about, encountering setback after setback in his personal and professional life from external stimuli, until he receives his Aunt Alethaea’s substantial bequest. Only then can he function happily in his solitary literary world, writing books without a care for whether people like them or not: Ernest asks Overton, “What can it matter to *me* . . . whether people read my books or not? It may matter to *them*—but I have too much money to want more I do not know nor greatly care whether they are good or not” (Butler, *Way* 355). He may not be a complete success in the professional sense, but he has finally achieved financial independence and can now happily pursue his writing in his own way, regardless of whether his critics approve or snub him.

David Guest does briefly identify the role of money in the life of George Pontifex, Ernest’s grandfather, by differentiating him from his father John Pontifex. Whereas John achieved a “modest success” due primarily to “his own industry,” George’s “considerable financial success owes as much to the kindness of his aunt and uncle, his wife’s dowry, and good fortune as it does his own efforts and merits” (Guest 287). To be clear, his aunt and uncle’s “kindness” includes a not insignificant inheritance upon their death in addition to the start they gave the young George in the publishing industry. Here Guest focuses on primarily distinguishing differences between the father, John Pontifex, and the son, George Pontifex, but this comment about money, as well as the following comment, while not crucial to the point of his essay, lends credence to my argument: “It becomes abundantly clear later in the novel that

mere wealth, even unearned wealth, is not enough to ruin a man. In Butler's world, money is as often as not a virtue, and one is certainly better off with it than without it" (287). Wealth indeed seems quite a requisite condition for Ernest in particular. The other point Guest makes which is relevant to my argument concerns whether Ernest can be considered a "success" or not. Guest thinks generally not. He states "it must be remembered that Ernest's success, at least in terms of his own life, is also marginal" (289). Guest grants that Ernest has only satisfactorily succeeded in "terms of the family line": here Guest describes Ernest's success is "unqualified" only because he returned his children to the working-class lifestyle of his great-grandfather when he "farm[ed them] out to rural, uneducated working folk" (289). In general, Guest believes that "Victorian society makes . . . an abysmal failure of Ernest," further stating that "Butler implies that Victorian society always forces the cream to the bottom, and always devolves" (292). While Guest reads Ernest as indicative of upper middle-class Victorian society in general, I choose to interpret Ernest as an individual struggling to succeed in not only upper middle-class society but also lower, poverty-stricken society as exemplified by his period as a curate among the poor and the brief period of his imprisonment (where he had no money of his own but where he admittedly did not need any since all his basic needs of food, shelter, and clothing were being met). Without the influx of substantial wealth, Ernest would indeed be the "abysmal failure" Mr. Guest declares him to be. However, he rises above his struggles when he comes into Aunt Alethaea's inheritance. Money quite literally "saves" him: he now adapts to his environment.

One critic, Danielle Neilsen, argues that Ernest does successfully adapt, or evolve, not because of money, but because of three traumatic shocks to his system that allow him to overcome his ancestral heritage. She states that "Butler's novel implies that free will is attainable, but only if one experiences and successfully adapts to trauma. The novel serves as a

literary laboratory where Butler conducts new philosophical and psychological experiments about heredity, memory, and instinct; he uses himself, through the characters of George Overton . . . and Ernest Pontifex . . . as case studies” (Neilsen 88). I beg to differ with her premise, that Ernest himself exerts free will because “he actively decides how and why to respond to catastrophe,” because I do not believe Ernest always makes his own decisions when confronted with disaster and because he seems to require money before he can adapt fully (88). Neilsen cites three traumatic incidents that she claims as determinative for Ernest’s adaptation. These three incidents are Ernest’s Aunt Alethaea’s death and the ensuing edict from his father, Theobald, that he must give up the organ-building project; the tinker Shaw’s “straightforward rationalism” as he “corrects Ernest’s fumbled description” of how the “Resurrection story . . . is different in each of the Gospels”; and finally Ernest’s “‘monstrous’ attack on Miss Maitland,” a young woman Ernest erroneously believed to be a prostitute, that ended in Ernest’s arrest and imprisonment (92-3, 95). Neilsen unfortunately ends her discussion with Ernest’s arrest, claiming that that his response to being imprisoned constitutes the “keenest and most precise conscious action that signals his full evolution” because he subsequently “severs the psychological ties” with his parents (96). Upon his release from prison, Ernest determined to sever all relations with his parents. He realized he was penniless: “[a]s soon as Ernest found that he had no money to look to upon leaving prison It was this that resolved him to part finally once and for all with his parents” (Butler, *Way* 253). His parents arrive on the day he was to be released from prison. His mother hugs him, crying “‘Oh my boy, my boy,’” and although Ernest cries, he tells her “‘we must part’” and asks the guard to take him to the door (263). Of course Theobald attempts to assert himself in his usually brusque way, declaiming “‘Ernest, you must not, shall not leave us in this way—’” but Ernest stands firm (263). He replies to his father,

“Do not speak to me,” and he leaves prison without his parents (263). Neilsen’s argument is that by “forsak[ing] all physical contact with his parents . . . he fully evolves and severs the psychological ties . . . [those] broken ties enable him to adapt and evolve” (Neilsen 96). But there is a further circumstance, or “traumatic shock,” Ernest must undergo that Neilsen never mentions. It is Ernest’s “marriage” to Ellen, the Pontifex’s former housemaid.

As described already, their supposed “marriage” is a disaster, it first being no legal marriage at all due to Ellen’s having been formerly married already to John, the coachman, and second due to Ellen’s alcoholism, which is quite a shock when Ernest discovers her deception. Ernest applies to Overton once again for assistance. By now Ernest has two children by Ellen, and the children must be provided for. Overton steps in and finds a place for them with his laundress until Ernest can make the eventual arrangements with the Rollings’ family, a couple living near Gravesend on the waterside, to take his two children in and raise them amongst their own children (Butler, *Way* 306). But at this point Overton assists Ernest once again – offering him the job as caretaker of his own fortune (303). Ernest shortly hereafter learns of his large inheritance from his aunt, and I suggest that it is this unexpected wealth, not the shock of imprisonment, or as Neilsen suggests, the “broken ties” with his parents, that ultimately allows Ernest to “adapt and evolve” (Neilsen 96). Because Ernest still relies on others, even after cutting his parents, when difficult circumstances arise, he has not managed to adapt and/or evolve in any complete manner as Neilsen suggests; he instead evolves and adapts as a direct function of receiving money.

CONCLUSION

What Samuel Butler does in *The Way of All Flesh* goes far beyond mere participation in the Bildungsroman genre with a coming-of-age tale for his protagonist. This text should not be read as merely a story of a child's growth to adult or as a critique of the Victorian institution of family: "we misread the novel if we regard it solely as a masterpiece of long-drawn-out matricide and parricide" (Bissell 303). David Guest also notes a similar vein running through the scholarship in his article "Acquired Characters: Cultural vs. Biological Determinism in *The Way of All Flesh*." He says that some critics "see *The Way of All Flesh* as a sort of negative example portraying the devolution of an English family" (Guest 283). Neither is the text merely an attack on Victorian cultural values in general in an "iconoclastic onslaught on Victorian complacency" (Holt 151). David Guest claims instead that "Butler's specific target, the novel's real villain, is urban, middle-class, Victorian society" (289). Butler subjects his hero to an evolutionary analysis, showing Ernest in his various life forms, and ultimately Butler presents us with a character who only achieves success when he acquires a substantial inheritance. Without the money, Ernest is nothing. Even Ernest's short-lived tenure as a successful shopkeeper is thwarted by his thieving alcoholic wife Ellen, and Ernest is too naive to know she is drinking. What little success Ernest had as a shopkeeper, Ernest lost – before the inheritance. When he came into his money, he truly "became something" in society – although not by his own efforts. Ernest is a writer, and had great success with his first book, but all successive books fail to achieve success. Ernest, although rich now, is still a failure – but because he's rich, he needn't care. Butler mocks the society that values money over achievement. While Butler certainly does challenge the institutions of Victorian culture, he presumes to apply evolutionary models to the human race and allows them to fail, in an age when people were embracing evolutionary

concepts, suggesting that the key ingredients for success (notwithstanding a keen intellect and hard work) are self-reliance and money.

Rubenstein correctly points out that “Money figures quite prevalently in Butler’s attacks on various aspects of mid-Victorian society” (240). Butler was “very ready to proclaim that hardly shall a poor man enter into the Kingdom of Heaven” (Cole 55-6). I trust that I have further developed just exactly how money “figures” in *The Way of All Flesh* and how important money was in the Victorian world in which Samuel Butler lived and moved. Even though Ernest casts off his faith in traditional religion, he preserves the habit of worship through his tendency to place mortal people in Christ-like positions. He finally learns to rely upon his instinct, intuitively trusting himself in matters of judgment and adopting a fervid belief in his own power to survive the crushing disappointments of life as long as he trusts his instinct. Ernest is like the embryo that “pass[es] through a number of strange metamorphoses before [adopting its] final shape . . . Every change is a shock” (Butler, *Way* 207). Overton is probably the only exception in Ernest’s sad life to the shock treatment; it is unlikely that he will “shock” Ernest. However, Ernest’s final shape remains undefined as the novel ends. He still rebels against his world, writing literature that no one wishes to publish, telling publishers to wait and there will be a time when his work will be accepted (Butler, *Way* 356). It is patently clear that instinct and wealth function as Ernest’s religion. Butler presents a protagonist who can be interpreted as a product of the Darwinian uncertainty sweeping the age: Ernest’s environment presents him with many strong, external stimuli, and Ernest adapts to fit into his changing environment by removing the belief structures (family and religion) responsible for inflicting such stimuli. But Ernest never gives up two elements of traditional religion: the father figure and the tendency to submit to a belief structure in fashioning one’s existence. Overton remains Ernest’s sagacious advisor, his

God the father figure, and instinct becomes Ernest's guiding principle—his own form of religion. With the theological God out of the picture, Butler substitutes wealth as the new entity to be worshipped. As he claims in his *Notebooks*, "A religion only means something so certainly posed that nothing can ever displace it. . . .It is an attempt to get an irrefragably safe investment, and this cannot be got, no matter how low the interest, which in the case of religion is about as low as it can be" (Butler, *Notebooks* 329). Religion had failed Butler. Darwin's evolutionary ideas had failed Butler. He wrote four books containing his own evolutionary ideas, which failed before the public. His literary success was slight during his lifetime. However, his posthumous accomplishment with *The Way of All Flesh* was tremendous: G.D.H. Cole referred to it as "one of the greatest novels in the English language" (Cole 12).

Chock-full of philosophy, theology, and scientific thought, Butler's novel offers the student of Victoriana a rich resource. In it Butler attempts to reconcile the current science of his day with theology and reflect how the Victorian world was affected. Butler's portrait of his world fascinates for many reasons. Butler's portrayal of Ernest Pontifex and his reliance on money and self helps bridge the Victorian world with that of the future – the modern world – in a way foreshadowed by his name. Butler combined "the given name [Ernest] of an earnest, serious young Victorian . . . with a surname that pointed to the ancient order of the Roman priesthood—the combination suggesting a new kind of secular priesthood which Ernest was to join" (Howard, Intro. vii). This new "secular priesthood" arguably can be considered the acquisition and adoration of wealth.

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