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Samuel Butler’s Way of All Flesh as a Sociological Novel

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SAMUEL BUTLER'S WAY OF ALL FLESH
AS A SOCIOLOGICAL NOVEL

A Thesis
Presented to
the Faculty of the Department of English
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In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

by
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SAMUEL BUTLER'S WAY OF ALL FLESH
AS A SOCIOLOGICAL NOVEL

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SAMUEL BUTLER'S WAY OF ALL FLESH AS A SOCIOCOLOGICAL NOVEL

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July 1976

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To scholars of Victorian literature, Samuel Butler has always been a rebel who strikes out at society with wide-ranging criticism. After years of studying subjects as varied as music, art, biology, literature, and theology, Butler felt (like many Victorian writers) that he could make valuable social comments with his satires, travelogues, biological studies, and one novel.

Critical studies of Butler have tended to treat in broad outline all facets of his life and work. This study, however, examines in depth Butler's novel The Way of All Flesh, as the focal point of his critical analysis of Victorian society. It treats the work as a sociological novel showing the main character Ernest Pontifex manipulated by harsh societal forces and presents the thesis that man needs to be freed from restrictive social determinism. It is thus the purpose of this study to suggest that Samuel Butler wrote The Way of All Flesh to summarize his criticism of Victorian society and to set forth his plea for a society governed by the principle of rational moderation in human affairs. To demonstrate this thesis, the present study will begin with Butler's life, emphasizing his study with schoolmasters, exposure to the clergy,
and life with his parents in an attempt to show the
development of his unconventional attitude toward con-
temporary society. A short introduction to Butler's life
is particularly important for a study of *The Way of All
Flesh* because this novel contains a great deal of pure
autobiography.

Following this introduction, the three strongest
areas of sociological comment will be examined as they
appear in *The Way of All Flesh*. Victorian schoolmasters,
clergymen, and parents all force Ernest Pontifex to suffer
a repressive existence. An inquiry into Butler's criticism
of these three social types and their influence in Victor-
ian society will form the main body of this study.

The next chapter of this thesis will be devoted to
explaining how Butler proposes to solve the problems that
he has introduced with his social criticism. Following
this chapter, the conclusion will summarize the main ideas
of this study and will deal with Butler's critical reputa-
tion. Also the conclusion will show the debt our freer
society owes to Samuel Butler's *Way of All Flesh* by examin-
ing some similarities between his novel's social criticism
and other targets of social criticism found in four in-
fluential twentieth century novels of rebellion. It will
finally be seen that Samuel Butler was not a flawless
novelist (or for that matter, a flawless philosopher), but the critical message of his *Way of All Flesh* far outweighed the strengths or weaknesses of its artistic form for a whole generation of anti-Victorians.
CHAPTER I

Butler's Life as Background for The Way of All Flesh

Samuel Butler (or Erewhon Butler as he is often called to distinguish him from the seventeenth-century English satirical poet) was born at Langar Rectory on the fourth of December in 1835. His father Thomas Butler was the rector at Langar, and his grandfather Dr. Samuel Butler was the well-known headmaster of Shrewsbury School. Butler's mother was Fanny Worsley, the daughter of a Bristol sugar refiner. Thomas Butler began his formal education at Shrewsbury with his father as headmaster. After graduation from Shrewsbury, Thomas continued his education at St. John's College, Cambridge graduating with a B.A. in 1829 and being ordained as a priest the following year.¹

The writing of background information on a man's family is often a very minor detail in any study. But

for Samuel Butler, the influence of his grandfather is extremely important. With the emphasis on educational discipline that Dr. Butler instituted at Shrewsbury, his son endured a great deal of punishment with his father as headmaster. What makes this information so pertinent to Butler's life is (as Phyllis Greenacre calls it) Thomas' "turning of the tables" on Samuel to make his son live under a more strict environment than he ever had to experience. ² Arnold Silver, editor of the Family Letters of Samuel Butler, states that young Samuel must have suffered great pain from his upbringing as evidenced by letters to that effect ranging from 1841 to 1886, the year of Thomas' death. ³ This harsh childhood becomes only one basis for Butler's novel The Way of All Flesh. To verify the actuality of the episodes found in the novel, Henry Festing Jones (Butler's closest friend) comments upon the historicity of Butler's plot:


Whether it was so or not, certainly the childhood of Ernest Pontifex in *The Way of All Flesh* is drawn as faithfully as he [Butler] could draw it from his own; Theobald and Christina [Ernest's parents] being portraits of his own father and mother as accurate as he could make them, with no softening and no exaggeration.

Thomas Butler without softening and without exaggeration was indeed a hard man. Edmund Gosse relates that Thomas Butler became a stern clergyman of the evangelical Simeonite type. These orthodox clergymen were quite common before the Oxford Movement began to gain popularity in the 1830's. Thomas believed that young men should be raised by rigid discipline, and frequent whipings for Samuel were seen as part of Thomas' Christian duty. Mrs. R. S. Garnett explains Canon Butler's religious attitude concerning discipline in her *Samuel Butler and His Family Relations*: "Man's nature was corrupt, and it was the duty of the conscientious parent to subdue it."6


Henry F. Jones comments upon the punishments really suffered by young Samuel Butler in comparison to those sustained by Ernest Pontifex in *The Way of All Flesh*:

He [Samuel] was so frequently flogged, ostensibly for trivial or imaginary delinquencies, but really, as it seems to the victim, because his father was in an irritable mood, that the account of poor Ernest's punishment is only a fair sample of his father's ordinary practice.

When one attempts to explain Thomas Butler's behavior toward his son, it seems simple enough to point to the harmful effect his own strict childhood had on his notion of the treatment of children or to his orthodox Christian beliefs, but in reality, Mrs. Garnett (a close family friend) declares that Thomas lacked the intelligence for fatherhood. Garnett further reveals that life in a rural rectory dulled the young Thomas' intelligence, and he soon lost his desire for complex thinking. Therefore, when two sons and two daughters were born to his wife, it was too much trouble to understand their young minds. 7

Hence, Samuel found himself relying upon his mother for the affection and advice he should have gotten in part from his father. This family situation was

7Ibid., pp. 150, 153.
bearable until Samuel grew older. Samuel could not go to his father with his troubles, so he repeatedly turned to his mother for advice and encouragement. When Samuel needed practical advice, his mother gave him her personal brand of romantic idealism spiced with passages of inspirational scripture. When other young boys begin to develop some common sense, Samuel remained very naïve about the world. Indeed, his parents actively counseled Samuel only about his choice of vocation. They pressured him strongly to become a clergyman. Thomas knew no other way of obtaining a living, so Samuel had no other choice besides the clergy. Also, it was customary for parents to assume that children will follow the father's example. In 1848, Samuel began his education at Shrewsbury.

When Samuel entered Shrewsbury, the days of his grandfather's headmastership were over, and Dr. Benjamin Hall Kennedy had taken the school's highest post. Like headmasters in most English schools Kennedy (says Clara Stillman in her *Samuel Butler: A Mid-Victorian Modern*) had a high regard for the use of strict discipline. She further states that Samuel— with a childhood of frequent punishment— never did overcome his dislike of
Dr. Kennedy's threatening demeanor. George William Fisher in his *Annals of Shrewsbury School* states that Dr. Kennedy liked to interfere with his pupil's religion because he did not like for them to make up their own minds on such important matters. Also, though Fisher is often excessive in his praise of Kennedy, he has to acknowledge a few faults concerning the headmaster's use of punishment:

> Sometimes and perhaps it might be said frequently, his [Kennedy's] impulsive temperament led him to inflict punishments which, if not altogether undeserved, were out of proportion to the offence.  

It can be surmised, after reading about common educational practices of Victorian schools, that Greek lessons provided the best chance for the schoolmaster to discipline the average pupil. Dr. Kennedy achieved fame as the classical scholar who brought Greek scholarship back to a strong position in the Shrewsbury curriculum after it had fallen into disfavor. Young Samuel did learn Greek from Dr. Kennedy, but it was sometimes a rather painful chore.

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10 Ibid., p. 363.
While Samuel continued his education at Shrewsbury, his father stressed that he continue to work toward becoming a clergyman. Paul Henderson in his *Samuel Butler: The Incarnate Bachelor* says that after Samuel grew too large for physical abuse, Thomas still continued to "browbeat him mentally."  

Evidently this mental stress succeeded, for in 1854 Samuel entered Cambridge with the intention of entering his father's profession. It was while he attended Cambridge that Samuel Butler was shocked by encountering flagrant hypocrisy in people who were reputed to be professionals in their occupation. He tells in his *Notebooks* that the dons of Cambridge were so involved in "educating" their students that they were actually not able to teach them anything of real value.  

In other words, the professors spent most of their time trying to look like learned men but they could not perform their most important function—teaching. Butler continues to make strong indictments of university professors when he states his viewpoint concerning their attitudes on the function of a university:


They professors hold the function of universities is to make learning repellent and then to prevent its becoming dangerously common. . . . Let them be afflicted by an epidemic of the fear-of-giving-themselves-away disease.13

Samuel also displays in his Notebooks a dissatisfaction with the common notion that the student should depend upon his professors' wealth of knowledge to gain an education. While at Cambridge, Butler found that students should have been taught to think for themselves, but job insecurity and pretension on the part of the professors prevented this from occurring frequently.14

Although childhood had left Samuel very cynical toward all adults in authority, his days at Cambridge were not a total loss. He gained freedom from physical punishment and a chance to express himself in the college newspaper, The Eagle. His first article "On English Composition and Other Matters" showed twenty-two year old Samuel declaring his independence from the affected literary style of his age. Young Butler felt that clarity and brevity of composition were the most important goals for every excellent writer. In his later works, one can see that he achieved these goals of lucid composition.

13Ibid., p. 296.

14Ibid., pp. 295-96.
But in 1858, Samuel had no idea that he would be the prolific writer of his later years. He placed twelfth in his classics honor examination for his B.A. degree (a very honorable achievement) and went to London in 1859 for parish work in preparation for ordination. While teaching classes of small boys about religion, Samuel took his first step toward open rebellion against church and family. Butler was under the impression that his classes were filled with boys who had all undergone baptism. By accident, he found one boy who had not been baptized and upon questioning his other students, he found many who were also not baptized. The problem that bothered Butler concerned the similar behavior of all the youngsters. Should not the baptized boys exhibit better behavior? Butler's naïve mind answered with a definite "Yes," and he began to doubt the powers of infant baptism. This questioning of the powers of religion eventually caused him to decline ordination. Butler honestly tried to adopt all his principles of religion in overt actions, but (as a friend writing of him in a 1908 London Times article says) he could never accept the fact that other human beings speak one way and act another. 15

Of course when Thomas Butler heard of Samuel’s objection to ordination, a family battle erupted. Joseph Jones in his Cradle of Erewhon states that Butler’s father decided the only respectable action for Samuel to take was to emigrate to New Zealand. Samuel had expressed a desire to study art but Jones says that Samuel’s father would not allow him to follow that vulgar course. Thomas had hurried his son into preparing for the clergy too early and now Jones believes that he rushed his son off to New Zealand to make amends for his own mistake.  

It is plain that Samuel Butler did not go to New Zealand for the same reasons as other Englishmen of this period. Jones discerns three major motivations for new settlement at this time: quick wealth in gold, cattle, and sheep. Sheep made Butler’s fortune as he doubled his original investment of £4,000 without much effort. Although he spent a large amount of time tending his herds, he had time to continue his studying. One work that he studied changed his whole life—Charles Darwin’s The Origin of Species.


17 Ibid., p. 6.
U. C. Knoepflmacher declares that Butler accepted the ideas of Darwin's *Origin* because they helped him sever his ties to the past, gave him freedom from feelings of guilt, allowed him to interpret religion from a scientific point of view, supported his failure in following the "ecclesiastical footsteps" of his father and grandfather, and furnished him with a logical system for understanding his inconsistent upbringing.¹⁸ Joseph Jones quotes in his book a *London Times* excerpt from a March 19, 1864 interview with Edward Chudleigh about Butler as a Darwinian:

> I think he is gone as far as man can go now, he is ultra-Darwinian . . . he does not believe the Bible to have been written under the influence of divine inspiration, but by good men, . . . . he does not believe there is a colossal ethereal being, that pervades all space and matter.¹⁹

After five years in New Zealand, in 1864 Samuel Butler returned to England, but he was a changed man. He had new riches and a new set of ideas, but the chief asset he gained in New Zealand was an objective attitude toward English society. In his work *Samuel Butler*,

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John Harris writes that New Zealand society remained in its infant stages while Butler was there, and he encountered very little self-deception among the members of the population. Upon his return, Butler looked at his native land as a foreigner, and disliked the sham of English society that he saw.  

On returning, he did not choose to live at Langar Rectory, but rented rooms in London instead. He almost immediately enrolled in Heatherly's Art School with the intention of becoming an accomplished painter. While at Heatherly's he tried to improve his art work, but he did not have the talent to sustain his efforts. Another struggling student who attended the school was a governess named Eliza Savage. Butler eventually became good friends with this plain little lady. Though their friendship remained ordinary and dull, Miss Savage seemed to be the biggest single influence upon Butler's style. As Butler expressed an interest in writing to Miss Savage and sent her his books, she "remodelled" his work with her intelligent criticism. Lee Holt in his critical study Samuel Butler relates that

Miss Savage, to induce Butler to write in a more popular manner, had him read Dickens, Thackeray, Fielding, Eliot, Goethe and others, but he said that the only contemporary writer he honestly enjoyed was Benjamin Disraeli. Butler—Harris affirms—disliked popular Victorian writers and their talks about style and polishing sentences to the "necessary exquisite point." With a disgust for ostentatiousness in mind, Butler made these comments on style in his Notebooks: "A man's style in any art should be like his dress—it should attract as little attention as possible." Butler did not heed Miss Savage's warnings and would not write in the accepted manner. Instead, in 1872 he wrote a satire entitled Erewhon. In this work, he satirizes parents, the church, social conformity, and universities, and points to many more general faults within all of English society. Holt in an article entitled "Samuel Butler and his Victorian Critics" reports that criticism of the novel was negative.


22 Harris, Samuel Butler Author of Erewhon, p. 18.

because of Butler's lack of conformity to the Victorian viewpoint. Literary critics citing minor failings could not see the merits of the overall work. From this first exposure to critics, Butler began to build a hatred for all arbiters of literary taste. An example of Butler's animosity can be found in his Notebooks when he says, "Critics generally come to be critics by reason not of their fitness for this, but of their unfitness for anything else."  

Despite this negative reception to his first work, Butler did not discontinue writing. Stimulated by Darwin's theories to study "higher criticism" of the Bible, Butler (Stillman says) read and was greatly influenced by David Strauss's A New Life of Jesus, Critically Examined. The result of his reflection upon Strauss's hallucination theory of Christ's resurrection—she maintains—was his second book, The Fair Haven (1873). This work was another satire purporting to defend the authenticity of the miracles

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26 Stillman, Samuel Butler: Mid-Victorian, p. 24. Strauss tries to prove that witnesses at Christ's resurrection saw an hallucination and their account of the scene started a religious myth.
that Christ performed in his ministry on earth, but actually satirizing the weakness of the arguments that support orthodox religion. While Erewhon was not popular, The Fair Haven enjoyed some interest. Gullible readers liked the book, Holt declares, because they thought it was a serious defense of orthodox faith. When Butler admitted that the book was satire and its real purpose was an argument against dogmatic orthodoxy, Holt says that critics and the public alike condemned Butler.\footnote{Holt, "Samuel Butler and His Victorian Critics," p. 150.}

In short, Samuel Butler found that he was a very unpopular anti-Victorian when Victorianism was most strongly felt.

Butler would have remained a scorned writer, but encouragement from Miss Savage caused him to start work on The Way of All Flesh in 1873. After working on the book for a while, Butler's writing was interrupted by financial troubles arising from some Canadian investments. Holt states that this interruption diverted his attention to another work entitled Life and Habit.\footnote{Holt, Samuel Butler, p. 58.} This book—which as Basil Willey states in his book Darwin and Butler was originally intended to explain Butler's theory of instinct as inherited memory from past generations—began Butler's long quarrel with Charles Darwin. Willey
feels that Butler thought his ideas in Life and Habit did not counter arguments made by Darwin's Origin, and he was prepared to publish his work as a supplement to Darwin's thought. But he continues by stating that just before Butler published his work, he read St. George Mivart's The Genesis of Species and found Mivart attacking evolution on the basis that natural selection could not be the most important reason for man's origin from lower species. Butler read The Origin again and found Darwin discounting Butler's own theory of the role of instinct in evolution as "a long-explooded error of Lamarck's" (a noted 18th century French naturalist). Butler changed his work from a footnote to Darwin's thought to a criticism of Darwin's ignorance of the importance of man's inherited instinct and intelligence in adapting to his environment. Butler felt that Darwin's theory of natural selection made man a mindless machine at the total mercy of nature's forces.²⁹

At this point, Willey says that Butler still had a high regard for Darwin because he had done a great deal to educate the public about evolution. Yet he still felt

that Darwin should have given Lamarck's thought more credit. After finishing *Life and Habit*, Butler read Darwin's *Historical Sketch*, a short appendix that Darwin added to the third edition of *The Origin*. In it Darwin mentions some scientists who anticipated his thoughts on evolution. With his curiosity stimulated from his recent writing of *Life and Habit*, Butler, as Willey recounts, read "with great critical acumen" the works of Lamarck, Buffon (another 18th century French naturalist) and Erasmus Darwin, Charles' grandfather. To say the least, Butler was shocked that the early scientists did foreshadow Darwin more than he had chosen to admit. And with his tender feelings alert to hypocrisy, he asked why Darwin waited to add his *Historical Sketch* after six thousand copies of his book had already been sold?30 Needless to say, Samuel Butler felt that Darwin was just another embarrassed hypocritical professor who suffered from fear-of-giving-himself-away disease.

Following the publication of *Life and Habit*, Butler found that even mild criticism of Darwin's thought evoked sharp reviews from literary critics. Lee Holt

30 Ibid., pp. 73-75.
expresses the view that after the publication of a much stronger anti-Darwinian attack in the work *Evolution Old and New* brought him openly hostile reviews from almost every critic, Butler found that Darwin's followers were in absolute control of the popular ideas of the day.\(^31\) In *Evolution Old and New*, Butler compares the theories of Buffon, Erasmus Darwin, and Lamarck to that of Charles Darwin and shows how Darwin—through accidental variation—pushes any idea of God involved in the world, outside of man's world. Butler, by emphasizing the theories advanced in *Life and Habit*, felt the concept of God should be included in an idea as famous as Darwin's idea of evolution.

While all of Butler's scientific study was being written, he worked on his novel, *The Way of All Flesh*. After beginning the work in 1873, he had almost stopped writing on it by 1878. Claude Bissell in his "Study of The Way of All Flesh" states that in 1878 Butler was inspired to rewrite the first chapters of the novel because he wanted to incorporate his *Life and Habit* theory into the plot.\(^32\)


Butler's work on *The Way of All Flesh* was interrupted again. This time Butler's writing was stopped by an accidental insult from Darwin that renewed their quarrel with greater vigor. Darwin published a translation of a German study about his grandfather written by Dr. Ernst Krause. Darwin testified in a preliminary note that the translation of Krause's *Erasmus Darwin* was accurate, but the printer accidently deleted an accompanying sentence stating that Krause's work had undergone a revision. Darwin had sent a copy of Butler's *Evolution Old and New* to Krause and he had revised his work by criticizing Butler's attempt to show the importance of Darwin's predecessors as a "weakness of thought and a mental anachronism which no one can enjoy". Of course, Butler felt that this was an attack, and curiosity caused him to translate Krause's original edition in German. When he found the first edition of *Erasmus Darwin* did not have any severe criticism of his ideas, he felt that Darwin had the translation of the revised

edition altered in an underhanded scheme to discredit him. Feeling that the best way to deal with this problem was a public response to the charges, William Irvine says (in his book Apes, Angels and Victorians) that Butler wrote letters to newspapers, and he received the most horrible response of all—total silence.\textsuperscript{34} After repeated attempts to force Darwin to say something in retaliation, Butler began to write his last two books on evolution. \textit{Unconscious Memory} appeared in 1880 and \textit{Luck or Cunning} was finished in 1886 (the year following the death of Miss Savage). Both books were written because of Butler's hostility toward Darwin and both, says Irvine, contain "more and more rage against Darwin, and less and less thinking about evolution."\textsuperscript{35} If rage inspired Butler's biological books, Miss Savage must have encouraged his creative efforts in the writing of \textit{The Way of All Flesh}. After her death in 1885 Butler found he could not write any more on the novel. According to Henry F. Jones, \textit{The Way of All Flesh} had been admired so much by Miss Savage


\textsuperscript{35}Ibid., p. 273.
that Butler felt impelled to abandon his original intentions of writing on the book after 1885.

At this time of his life, it is apparent that Samuel Butler was alienated from the world. Victorian thought was deeply involved with the argument of theology versus science. Butler made churchmen angry by ridiculing their God and criticizing their way of blinding themselves to social injustice. He castigated scientists for accepting Darwin's mechanized world and for paying no attention to his own theories. Since he was not supporting either camp, it would have been comforting to receive some sympathy from his family (especially after Miss Savage's death). Arnold Silver states that "From Langar he failed to obtain even a modicum of understanding." Butler felt disapproval from his family constantly, and he still was in the uncomfortable position of having to depend upon his father for financial assistance until 1886. On December 29th of that year, Thomas Butler died and Samuel inherited enough money to live without effort for the rest of his life.


For Butler, living comfortably did not mean living a life of inactivity. Having the means to take an annual vacation, Butler always managed to spend each summer in Italy. Butler loved Italy and its relaxed people and in 1888 he published his second Italian travel book entitled *Ex Voto* (the first being *Alps and Sanctuaries*, 1882). Also Butler found he had time to study and write music. Since his school days he had a love for the music of George Frederic Handel and he attempted some musical composition with Handel as his model. Upon inheriting some family papers in 1886, Butler's interest was stimulated in his grandfather Butler and he wrote a two-volume biography that was published in 1896. In 1897 after much study, Butler wrote the *Authoress of the Odyssey*. This book, arguing that certain passages of the *Odyssey* prove that it was written by a woman, was, as C. E. M. Joad says, ignored by literary scholars. Joad continues by admitting that the work showed Butler as an accomplished scholar who made a good case for this unusual opinion.\(^{38}\) Butler should not have been totally overlooked by literary scholars. As proof of his erudition, in 1898 he published a translation of the *Iliad* and in 1900 he followed this

\(^{38}\text{Joad, } \text{Samuel Butler, pp. 128-29.}\)
with a translation of the *Odyssey*. Butler, Joad says, knew much of both poems by heart.\(^{39}\)

The last years of Samuel Butler's literary life were little better than the rest. In 1899, he published a book called *Shakespeare's Sonnets Reconsidered* arguing that the sonnets were not in proper chronological order. Butler rearranged the sonnets and made his own emendations. Of course with Butler's reputation among literary circles, Shakespeare scholars, as Lee Holt states, considered the book a "freak."\(^{40}\) The final work to be written by Butler was *Erewhon Revisited*. This work was not a success even though *Erewhon* had attracted a few admirers during Butler's lifetime. *Erewhon Revisited* continued *Erewhon's* earlier social attacks, but a much more mature and dull Butler was revealed in this later work.

On Good Friday in 1902, Butler took a trip to Sicily. He became ill and died of intestinal catarrh and pernicious anemia on June 18, 1902. His body was cremated and his ashes were dispersed. Samuel Butler lived an unhappy life. Constantly feeling that the

\(^{39}\)Ibid., p. 128.

work he did should deserve some small notice during his lifetime, he was shunned by Victorian society and only made £62 on all his books. It is ironic that the book which would bring him his most fame (The Way of All Flesh) is the one that he would not publish.

After finishing this novel, Butler worried about the damage it would do to his family reputation, and he placed the manuscript in a desk drawer. Since so much of the book was autobiographical, he was sure that family members and acquaintances would recognize personal qualities used in the development of each character. Despite Butler's qualms about publication, his literary executor allowed the work to go to press in 1903 and it circulated among Butler's friends. As the book became popular, it was evident that Butler should not have worried about hurting family feelings. Even Mrs. R. S. Garnett, who tries to defend the Butler family reputation, says that Samuel's book is meant to be presented entirely in a dramatic manner. Butler chose to expose a whole generation and their ideals and not just one family.41 Butler says all this

41Garnett, Samuel Butler and His Family, pp. 7-8.
best when he speaks through the persona of Ernest Pontifex:

If the mischief deception had ended with himself, he [Ernest] should have thought little about it, but there was his sister, and his brother Joey, and the hundreds and thousands of young people throughout England whose lives were being blighted through the lies told them by people whose business it was to know better, but who scamped their work and shirked difficulties instead of facing them. It was this which made him think it worth while to be angry, and to consider whether he could not at least do something towards saving others from such years of waste and misery as he had to pass himself.42

What Butler did was change a whole generation's attitude toward its Victorian forbears. The typical Victorian—according to Walter Houghton—accepted all outward "credentials of authority" and tried to be conventional rather than rebellious.43 Butler could not accept every individual as an untarnished master of his profession. Butler saw many opportunities for criticism and much need for improvement in three main areas of Victorian society—schoolmasters, the clergy, and parents. By the time his The Way of All Flesh


was read by young people of the early twentieth century, its social criticism was accepted and hailed as truth. Now when one looks at histories of the Victorian era (such as Houghton's *Victorian Frame of Mind*) Butler is finally credited with his deserved honor of initiating the "modern spirit."\textsuperscript{44}

\textsuperscript{44}Ibid., p. 93.
Butler's *Way of All Flesh* has been called a novel that changed twentieth-century society. In this respect, Butler's work could be included in a small category of literature called anti-Victorian fiction. Yet if one understands Butler's purpose in writing *The Way of All Flesh*, the novel becomes a work in a much broader literary group. *The Way of All Flesh* is a sociological novel. The sociological novel is often confused with two similar types of fiction called the propaganda novel and the proletarian novel. All three deal with society and society's problems; but, as Granville Hicks states, sociological novels are concerned with changing mankind's welfare on a large scale while the other two kinds deal with more immediate problems that can be solved easily.¹ N. Elizabeth Monroe in *The Novel and Society* says that the propaganda novel strives to remedy social situations through the use of a doctrinaire

theory. Often, she continues, the propaganda novelist will "bend" fictional life in his novel so much (for the sake of his propaganda) that any image of reality will likely disappear from his reader's mind.²

The proletarian novel is also akin to the sociological novel, but it is even more limited in its subject matter than the propaganda novel. Edwin Seaver in his article "What is a Proletarian Novel" states that this work is a "novel of history or political philosophy." He is more specific when he asserts that the proletarian novel always depicts a class struggle. In fact, the proletarian novel is usually the story of the role the lower socio-economic class plays in man's social history.³

After revealing in a broad sense the difference between these three kinds of related fiction, the sociological novel can be further defined. Butler concentrates his writing of The Way of All Flesh on Ernest Pontifex, and shows how society (chiefly clergymen, schoolmasters, and the family) manipulates this young man.


Edwin Burgum in his *Novel and the World's Dilemma* declares that the recording of society's effect upon the individual is of prime importance to the sociological novelist.\(^4\) Finally Thrall, Hibbard and Holman's definition of the sociological novel in their *Handbook to Literature* says that the sociological novel may argue a thesis for a resolution of the criticism presented.\(^5\) However this does not make a sociological novel a propaganda or proletarian novel. Butler offers his *Life and Habit* solution to relieve the repression that Ernest Pontifex lives with, and he means for his thesis to be addressed to all of Victorian society. He did not write *The Way of All Flesh* to rid society of one particular problem or to benefit just one social class. Butler's thesis is not like the "violent and raw ideas" that Allan Monkhouse says are applied to the writing of propaganda or proletarian novels; Butler is a more sophisticated idealist who stages a "civilized drawing-room revolt against the constitution of society."\(^6\)

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Throughout *The Way of All Flesh*, Butler criticized so many Victorian institutions that he became known as an iconoclast. One particular institution that frequently fell victim to his social criticism was the English system of education. From his earliest education at Shrewsbury to his days at Cambridge, Butler felt that he had been cheated by teachers who did not know how to instruct students. When Butler finally found a teacher who could make him learn, he decided that what he had learned was of no value to his life at all. In order to reveal his real views of education in *The Way of All Flesh*, Butler invented a pseudonym for his headmaster at Shrewsbury (Dr. Skinner) and called his school Roughborough. Even with this disguise, readers could perceive the real intent that Butler had in mind when he wrote about education. Although his attacks were partly directed against his alma mater, he spoke out against injustice in all Victorian schools.

When Ernest enrolls in Roughborough, he thinks he is entering a new environment. However in reality, he will continue to live under the same disciplinary rules that are popular with his father. Roughborough stresses deportment and classical scholarship and timid Ernest
soon feels the pressure that both requirements place on his young life. C. E. M. Joad testifies to the accuracy of Butler's portrayal of Victorian educational policy when he states that the harsh punishment so common in the English home was often continued by schoolmasters. If any aspect of discipline differed from Butler's account in *The Way of All Flesh*—Joad continues—it would be that schoolmasters often had more authority over their charges than even the parents.7

Schoolmasters (including Dr. Skinner) frequently saved their strongest chastisements for the student who failed to learn his Latin or Greek lesson. Richard Altick might be talking of Roughborough when he says that classical studies were used as a disciplinary tool in Victorian schools. In order for young men to have good minds, Altick continues, exercises in Latin and Greek grammar, rhetoric, translation, and memorization were common in the schools. The only problems occurred in the actual administration of the exercises. Altick cites the lack of "humane content" about the classical works assigned that made them merely exercises and that was all.8 Edward Overton (Butler's narrator)

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writes about the usual taunt Dr. Skinner shouts to Ernest when he could not pronounce a Greek word:

Nevertheless, he [Ernest] was far from happy. Dr. Skinner was much too like his father. True, Ernest was not thrown in with him Dr. Skinner much yet, but he was always there; there was no knowing at what moment he might not put in an appearance, and whenever he did show, it was to storm about something... He called Ernest "an audacious reptile" and said he wondered the earth did not open and swallow him up because he pronounced Thalia with a short i.9

Ernest continues his education at Roughborough, but never learns to enjoy it. Instead, he realizes that his headmaster is not the brilliant scholar he is supposed to be. Also, Dr. Skinner corrupts his students by teaching useless information that does not educate them for the real world. Ernest learns that when Dr. Skinner teaches his wrong solutions to problems of life, and is confronted with a challenge from his students, he always changes topics quickly to avoid any argument. Worst of all, Ernest learns that the book that made Skinner famous (his Meditations on St. Jude) is plagiarized. In short, Ernest knows

there is blatant hypocrisy in his home and now he finds it at school in of all people—the headmaster.  

At one point, Butler has Overton deliver a direct address to all schoolmasters urging them to be kinder to all their students in order to avoid bad publicity like that in *The Way of All Flesh*:

> O schoolmasters—if any of you read this book—bear in mind when any particularly timid drivelling urchin is brought by his papa into your study, and you treat him with the contempt which he deserves, and afterwards make his life a burden to him for years—bear in mind that it is exactly in the disguise of such a boy as this that your future chronicler will appear. Never see a wretched little heavy-eyed mite sitting on the edge of a chair against your study wall without saying to yourselves, "perhaps this boy is he who, if I am not careful, will one day tell the world what manner of man I was." If even two or three schoolmasters learn this lesson and remember it, the preceding chapters will not have been written in vain.  

One could say that these are Ernest's own final words as he leaves Roughborough. At Cambridge he thinks the dons will be sensible scholars and excellent teachers, and that he will learn something profound that will transform his life. At Cambridge he learns a lot that


11 *Ibid.*, p. 120.
actually shapes his life, but not in a positive manner.

When Ernest enters Cambridge, disappointment soon reappears. Richard Altick says that Cambridge of Victorian times was characterized by an anachronistic curriculum. Modern subjects had not been added at all because mathematics and classics were judged the most important of all studies.¹² Not only does Ernest enter Cambridge before modern studies became popular, but he also finds Dr. Skinner's brand of hypocrisy in the college. C. E. M. Joad comments on the criticism of professors in The Way of All Flesh. In Ernest's day, English society respected college professors for their learning, and seldom were they questioned about any opinion they furnished. Butler wants readers of The Way of All Flesh to see that many professors lead people "by the nose" in order to appear intelligent. Joad says that Ernest was taught by professors who learned superficial ideas in order to make their outmoded opinions appear truthful. Because Cambridge professors did not like to have their opinions doubted by their students, they chose to ignore all arguments that did not support their own beliefs.¹³

¹²Altick, Victorian People, p. 254.
¹³Joad, Samuel Butler, pp. 110, 124, 126-27.
As a consequence of all this imposture, Ernest was deprived of the solid foundation of good judgement he needed. Since he was reared by unworltdy parents, and attended Roughborough where he learned Latin and Greek exercises by rote, Ernest knew very little about life. It is evident that Cambridge did not help him to mature. While Ernest attended college, it would seem appropriate for him to be encouraged to enter the ministry. However, the college always remains in the novel's background, and Ernest gains his desire to become a clergyman from another source, the Reverend Gideon Hawke. Hawke visits the campus and his reputation as an evangelical preacher becomes well-known. About the time Ernest begins to worry about his proposed vocation, he has a chance to hear Mr. Hawke preach. In brief, Ernest becomes excited by Hawke's handsome appearance and sincere mien. As a result of Hawke's sermon, Ernest tells his parents of his newfound love for the ministry and they are shocked by his sudden change of personality.  

14 For a detailed discussion of Theobald's reaction see pp. 50-51 below.
shocked than anyone else, for they were sending a young man into life with a desire to change the world and with no educational background at all with which to accomplish his goals.\(^\text{15}\)

Butler finds many ways of dramatizing the failure of Ernest's university education. Ernest befriends another clergyman named Pryer who declares that he possesses the same evangelical spirit as Ernest. The only spirit that Pryer has—as the reader soon finds out, and Ernest does not—is that of a confidence man. Pryer knows that naive Ernest will believe all he says. He convinces Ernest that moving to London and living among poor people is the best way to learn how to aid them. Also Pryer makes Ernest believe that a College for Spiritual Pathology is the best way to save souls. Ernest contributes money to the College from his grandfather's inheritance, and Pryer loses it all in stock-market speculation. Ernest cannot distinguish between good and evil (a frightful condition to be in while living in a London slum), so he is cheated out of his whole inheritance by Pryer. If Cambridge had taught

him anything at all, it certainly had nothing to do with the faults of human nature.

Later Ernest finds that knowledge of human nature is not all he lacks. After visiting neighbors to discover how he might serve them, he learns how ignorant he really is. One group of visitors he sees are the Baxters. Here, Ernest realizes he does not know anything about the Methodist faith. Ernest comments on the religion of the Baxters and expresses surprise that they already have a religious organization that has anticipated his "unique" College for Spiritual Pathology:

He knew the Church of England, or thought he did, but he knew nothing of Methodism beyond its name. When he found that, according to Mr. Baxter, the Wesleyans had a vigorous system of Church discipline (which worked admirably in practice) it appeared to him that John Wesley had anticipated the spiritual engine which he and Pryer were preparing, and when he had left the room he was aware that he had caught more of a spiritual Tartar than he had expected. But he must certainly explain to Pryer that the Wesleyans have a system of Church discipline. This was very important.\textsuperscript{16}

Ernest slowly realizes the inadequacy of his education, but a short visit to Mr. Shaw the neighborhood tinker hastens his process of self-evaluation. Ernest puts

\textsuperscript{16}Ibid., p. 258.
his education to the test in discussing one of the books he has studied for ordination. Of course he thinks that his preparation will confound this uneducated tinker completely, but the reception he receives astounds him. Ernest asks Mr. Shaw what he thinks about Archbishop Whately's book, *Historic Doubts*, and Shaw undermines Ernest's argument with little effort:

"If you really want to know," said Mr. Shaw, with a sly twinkle, "I think that he who was so willing and able to prove that what was was not, would be equally able and willing to make a case for thinking that what was not was, if it suited his purpose." Ernest was very much taken aback. How was it that all the clever people of Cambridge had never put him to this rejoinder? The answer is easy: they did not develop it for the same reason that a hen has never developed webbed feet—that is to say, because they did not want to do so. 17

Ernest suffers more humiliation before he realizes he is a failure. Finally he becomes so despondent that he makes advances to a girl he presumes is a prostitute. Still finding himself unable to judge character, he chooses a respectable woman and is sent to prison for his improprieties. This crime ends his hopes for the

17Ibid., p. 260.
ministry and it gives Ernest time to think about how he has been tricked by life. At this point, U.C. Knoepflmacher says that Ernest realizes his parents have forced him into the wrong profession. His teachers have used him as an excuse for the practice of their occupation, filling his mind with impractical ideas that have undermined his life. Ernest knows that he is inadequate for the world. Edward Overton, in commenting on Ernest's dilemma, states Ernest's problem in a blunt manner:

The only excuse I can make for him is that he was very young—not yet four and twenty—and that in mind as in body, like most of those who in the end come to think for themselves, he was a slow grower. By far the greater part, moreover, of his education had been an attempt, not so much to keep him in blinkers, as to gouge his eyes out altogether.

Ernest Pontifex went to one of the best schools in England, and then to a college that had a respectable worldwide reputation. Samuel Butler cannot criticize education better than to show that the product of all those years of study is an educated fool. Butler felt that educational curriculum should be guided by utility and not just by


19Butler, Way of All Flesh, p. 267.
old-fashioned traditions. He really yearned for more freedom for the youth of Victorian society. In childhood, Latin and Greek should not be forced into young minds because physical heartiness is the best educational foundation for small children to cultivate. After a healthy body has been developed, the mind is in a better condition to learn. Butler has Edward Overton speak his philosophy when he comments on Ernest at Roughborough:

Never learn anything until you have been made uncomfortable for a good long while by not knowing it; when you find that you have occasion for this or that knowledge, or forsee that you will have occasion for it shortly, the sooner you learn it the better, but till then you spend your time in growing bone and muscle; these will be much more useful to you than Latin or Greek, nor will you ever be able to make them if you do not do so now, whereas Latin and Greek can be acquired at any time by those who want them.\(^\text{20}\)

On the whole, Samuel Butler says in *The Way of All Flesh* that the teaching of a useless education is a heinous crime. Ernest Pontifex feels the full force of a savage world upon leaving Cambridge, and his weak education almost causes his death. Yet when Butler has

\(^{20}\text{Ibid.}, pp. 130-31.\)
Ernest almost die of brain fever in a prison hospital, death seems to be a more preferable outcome than the one his father experienced upon leaving Cambridge. Ernest will finally recover from his sickness and educate himself. As we shall see in chapter three, Theobald joins the ranks of clerical hypocrites, and suffers a slow mental death without a whimper.
CHAPTER III

The Victorian Clergy: Hypocrites or Dullards

When Butler's *Way of All Flesh* gained a great popularity in the early twentieth century, one reason was the novel's criticism of hypocritical Victorian clergymen. Today, as one looks at Butler's work, it seems that he may have exaggerated the ills of the nineteenth-century Church of England. Of course, doubts about Butler's accuracy have most often concerned his portrayal of Ernest's father Theobald as a typical Victorian clergyman. As early as 1926, critics like Mrs. Garnett wrote books to defend the Butler family name from Butler's *Way of All Flesh*. Yet Mrs. Garnett makes one error. Primarily Mrs. Garnett—as Arnold Silver says—could not capture any viewpoint of Thomas Butler (Butler's Theobald) other than his public image. Since she only knew Thomas as a clergyman performing his community duties, she felt she had to disagree with Butler's version of Thomas in *The Way of All Flesh*.¹ This is an important point to

consider in relation to the novel because Butler does not spend many pages on Theobald's public image. Ernest can see Theobald from an intimate point of view that is totally divorced from his excellent reputation in the community of Battersby. It is this "behind the scenes" glimpse at a clergyman that makes *The Way of All Flesh* so revealing. When Butler shows Theobald's self-imposed mental blindness, hypocrisy, dullness of life, lack of intelligence, and repression of feelings due to dogmatic orthodoxy, he writes for other clergymen's children who are too afraid to speak.

Theobald's flawless public life is always on display for all his parishioners to see, but Butler soon makes his private life appear a lot less than happy. Theobald's father George chooses the clergy as Theobald's profession, and forces him to be ordained even though he has serious doubts about the Church as a lifelong occupation.² Theobald is eventually married to Christina Allaby. Again, he has little choice in the matter because of her witty scheming and his ignorance of women. They finally settle in the small village of Battersby. At Battersby, this young man finds himself living a very

²For a detailed discussion of this matter see p. 58 below.
dull existence that he secretly hates. Publicly he performs all the perfunctory duties that he is expected to do, but he cannot conceal his frustrations from his family. Reared in a clergyman's home, Ernest Pontifex saw how hateful a man of God could be. Andrew Drummond in his *Churches in English Fiction* says, in a defense of the accuracy of *The Way of All Flesh*, that Butler presents a "realistic picture" of a nineteenth-century evangelical minister even though his intense hatred of Theobald seems to influence the novel's verity.\(^3\)

To discover how truthful Butler's novel is, one may consult histories of the Victorian period to determine the religious climate. Richard Altick in his *Victorian People and Ideas* states that the Victorian church was suffering from two major attacks. One attack was the higher criticism of the Bible. Essentially, this meant that people were no longer reading their Bibles literally since they had doubts about the actual occurrence of certain events in the *Old and New Testaments*. Another worrisome enemy of the orthodox Church was the popular interest in science. *Darwin's Origin of Species*  

(the period's most popular scientific study) made people doubt the authenticity of the story of Genesis.  

People everywhere found themselves suffering from a fear of impending religious perplexity, and it should have been the concern of clergymen to try to calm these worries. It is interesting to read how Theobald confronts threats to his religion by utter blindness to their existence:

> It had never so much as crossed Theobald's mind to doubt the literal accuracy of any syllable in the Bible. He had never seen any book in which this was disputed, nor met with anyone who doubted it [the people of Battersby knew not to mention higher criticism to Theobald]. True, there was just a little scare about geology, [the argument saying that the story of the creation in Genesis was geologically impossible] but there was nothing in it. If it was said that God made the world in six days, why He did make it in six days.  

Samuel Butler had discarded his father's habit of reading the Bible literally by the time he wrote The Way of All Flesh. To Butler, a literal belief in the Bible was inane, and constituted a serious flaw in Theobald—a typical Victorian clergyman.  

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Not only could Theobald blind himself to attacks on his religion through a strict interpretation of the Scriptures, but he could also make it his profession to ignore any inconvenient occurrences in his daily life. When Ernest needs Theobald to act in his role of father, Theobald shuts his eyes and defends his position of inactivity:

Doubtless Theobald saw these looks [looks of anxiety in the face of Ernest] . . . but it was his profession to know how to shut his eyes to things that were inconvenient—no clergyman could keep his benefice for a month if he could not do this; besides he had allowed himself for so many years to say things he ought not to have said, and not to say things he ought to have said, that he was little likely to see anything that he thought it more convenient not to see unless he was made to do so.7

In Theobald's life, blindness to reality causes more difficulties than it solves. Since he skirts the powerful anti-religious issues of his day, he finds himself alienated from problems that his own parishioners are struggling with, and since he chooses to disregard the "improper" difficulties his children present him, they suffer through a childhood without fatherly love and understanding. When worldly troubles became too unbearable, William Marshall points out that dreamy

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thoughts of heaven always came to rescue Theobald and Christina. In other words they invoke God to escape direct involvement with other human beings. In some cases, they excuse themselves from offering honest Christian aid.  

One such case involves the unexpected pregnancy of an attractive servant girl named Ellen. Butler, in writing this episode, shows how heartless a minister and his wife can be. He exposes the thoughts of Christina, who initially fears that Ellen's baby might be Ernest's and then suddenly loses contact with the world in one of her frequent self-centered daydreams:

She could not bear to think of it, [Ernest being the father of the child] and yet it would be mere cowardice not to look such a matter in the face—her hope was in the Lord, and she was ready to bear cheerfully and make the best of any suffering He might think fit to lay upon her. ... The guilt of the parents must not be shared by the innocent offspring of shame—oh! no—and such a child as this would be. ... She was off in one of her reveries at once. The child was in the act of being consecrated Archbishop of Canterbury when Theobald came in from a visit in the parish, and was told of the shocking discovery.

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Theobald's response to the situation is one that seems ironic for a true man of God. Upon hearing of Ellen's trouble, he shoves her from his household with her weekly pay and forgets all about her. However, Butler does not forget Ellen as a character. Ellen reappears in his novel as an alcoholic. She marries Ernest—who does not recognize her alcoholism—and almost ruins his life. With just a little compassion, Theobald and Christina could have averted the disastrous life that Ellen found upon leaving their home. Fearing involvement, they retreat into their own worlds of piety and feel (in a self-righteous manner) that their inaction is the only decent Christian thing to do.

With Theobald facing his difficult problems without a commitment to action, all the work that remains for him in Battersby is of the nature of a deadening dull routine. Richard Altick states that the Victorian church discarded a traditional seventeenth-century worship service which was "full of splendor" for a service that included a canon in a black gown, a sermon full of repetition, and prayers that always seemed formal and indifferent.10 Theobald is definitely not

10Altick, Victorian People, p. 216.
stimulated by the tasks he has to perform every Sunday. Through the week, his life is also filled with meaningless labors so he can convey the appearance of industriousness. He spends much time gardening. Also, every morning he searches for passages in the Old and New Testaments having parallel meaning. After acquiring this habit of daily scholarship over the years, Theobald has a formidable pile of notes for a book he will call *Harmony of the Old and New Testaments*. When he dies, his life's work is auctioned and it brings nine pence a wheelbarrow load.

Theobald—Butler makes clear—does not have to earn his living by working on his *Harmony*. Throughout Theobald's week, he commonly visits the sick in his parish. This duty could have been an important service Theobald could have performed, but he chooses to think of it as just another boring chore. Once, facing a dying woman who suffers from religious doubts on her deathbed, Theobald squelches her fearful cries for reassuring answers by reading prayers from a booklet entitled "Visitation of the Sick." Finding that this does no good, he scares the woman nearer death by reminding her of her judgement day.\(^{11}\)

After saying his usual trite phrases that end his sick-bed

visitation, Butler describes Theobald's attitude as he leaves the dying parishioner's home:

He makes off as fast as he can from the fetid atmosphere of the cottage to the pure air outside. Oh, how thankful he is when the interview is over!

He returns home, conscious that he has done his duty, and administered the comforts of religion to a dying sinner. . . . day after day he trudges over the same plover-haunted fields, and listens at the end of his walk to the same agony of forebodings, which day after day he silences, but does not remove, till at last a merciful weakness renders the sufferer careless of her future, and Theobald is satisfied that her mind is now peacefully at rest in Jesus. 12

Irony is evident in every passage concerned with the efficacy of Theobald's ministry. But irony is most obvious when Ernest becomes a zealous student of theology at Cambridge. 13 In this episode, Butler makes Theobald look foolish when Ernest suddenly "gets religion" from a radical evangelical minister. Over his years of rural ministry, Theobald becomes less evangelical and more tolerant of religious practices he once considered Popish. Ernest, in a fit of religious passion, finds himself a more fervent Christian than his own father.

Instead of embracing his son with joy at this sudden expression of piety, Theobald expresses contempt for Ernest's challenge to the Theobald Pontifex monopoly of sensible religion:

Theobald was frightened out of his wits. ... He hated people who did not know where to stop. Ernest was so outré and strange; there was never any knowing what he would do next, except that it would be something unusual and silly. ... The opportunity for telling his son that he was a fool was too favourable not to be embraced, and Theobald was not slow to embrace it. Ernest was annoyed and surprised for had not his father and mother been wanting him to be more religious all his life?14

This is indeed one of the best examples of social criticism of the clergy to be found in Butler's work. Samuel Butler could not accept men who do not live as they believe. The Victorian church was filled with such a multitude of hypocrites that The Way of All Flesh had a poignant meaning for a great many readers.

Yet Butler was realistic enough to know that men like Theobald were not born hypocrites. They were made that way by a ridiculous system of religion. Robert Shafer in his work Christianity and Naturalism points out that Butler's main difference with Christianity was

its mandatory crushing of man's "natural propensities" for the attainment of an end result "to which these propensities do not of themselves lead."\textsuperscript{15} This denial of normal feelings often occurs when a clergyman blindly follows orthodox faith. For Theobald, personal relationships, habits, family customs, and official functions are all performed by the rulebook when he enters the ministry. After years of this suffocating existence, he thinks he is living a divine life because he never examines himself objectively.\textsuperscript{16} This last point rankled Samuel Butler's temper more than any other, since he felt many Victorian clergymen were professing the performance of good works when they were in fact doing just the opposite. Butler (as we have seen) has Theobald behave in "the proper manner" all through his novel. However, Ernest's view makes Theobald appear unsuccessful in behaving like—what society calls—a true Christian. Theobald views himself as a righteous man, but attempts to help others only to gain popularity in the village of Battersby. Theobald is always a


professional. But when he tries to help people, Butler thinks he is too impersonal and professional. In The Way of All Flesh, Butler wants all men to be unconscious doers of good deeds. When one serves without ulterior motives, others sense honest virtue in the act. In The Way of All Flesh, Samuel Butler tells his readers that the typical Victorian clergyman should already know all this, but sadly he does not. 17

CHAPTER IV

The Victorian Family: Butler's Worst Enemy

There, sure enough, standing at the end of the table nearest the door were the two people whom he Ernest regarded as the two most dangerous enemies in all the world—his father and mother.¹

With these words, Samuel Butler describes Ernest's feelings when he leaves prison and sees his parents waiting to welcome him home. Instead of gracefully accepting their offer, Ernest thinks some of the most shocking anti-familial thoughts ever expressed in an English novel. What makes Ernest hate his parents with such intensity? The Way of All Flesh is a list of all the ways a parent can punish a child, and it is evident that Ernest has valid excuses for disliking his father and mother.

For all the time that Butler concentrates upon the childhood sufferings of Ernest, he does not want his readers to think that Ernest's family situation is unusual. The many critics who discuss the Victorian

family sound like Butler in *The Way of All Flesh*. Richard Altick writes about the customary role of the Victorian father: "Pater familias when he came back from the office after a hard day . . . reigned as lord and master at table and fireside."² John Harris states that Butler and Ernest lived in a period of stern parental discipline. Harris further states that clergymen's homes were not the only households where parents executed harsh punishments at their slightest whims. Ernest was just one child in a "period of repression." The younger generation was not taught to discover their own moral values in life; they were forced to respect their parent's beliefs and were punished if they did not adopt them as their own.³ Hugh Lunn Kingsmill, in *After Puritanism*, captures the critical attitude that Butler strives to convey to every reader of *The Way of All Flesh*. Kingsmill comments on Butler's idea of ordinary Victorian parents:


Fallible human beings merely through becoming parents, not a highly specialized achievement, took on a sacrosanct character, appearing to their children as faultless beings who were delaying their return to Heaven solely from a great-hearted resolve to redeem their thankless and depraved offspring, if redemption were any way possible, from the well-earned pains of hell.  

Even though The Way of All Flesh is largely concerned with the life of Ernest Pontifex, he is not the only character to suffer from harsh parents in the novel. Butler furnishes enough details of Theobald's childhood to show that his father (George) also knew how to impose a father's will upon a child.

George Pontifex serves as Butler's example of a typical middle-class Victorian parent. In order for George to be a successful man, he has to manage a thriving religious book business efficiently. Similarly, he thinks his family should behave like an efficient business. V. S. Pritchett reveals that average middle-class fathers in the nineteenth century felt that their families could "run like the machines that were making their money." To make the family operate well, the father exerted the smallest amount of energy and

expected his will to be obeyed without question. While George Pontifex enjoys making money in his business, he dislikes his children. He explains his reasons for feeling this way as follows:

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. ... 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.  

When young Theobald could not behave like his father's riches, he could expect a brutal whipping. Amy Cruse states that Victorian parents (even the most loving ones) believed the more their children were whipped, the quicker they could learn to live a correct life.  

Butler comments on this attitude when he tells of George's reason for disciplining Theobald:

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It [the purpose of whipping] consisted in checking the first signs of self-will while his children were too young to offer serious resistance. If their wills were "well broken" in childhood, to use an expression then much in vogue, they would acquire habits of obedience which they would not venture to break through till they were over twenty-one years old.\(^8\)

By the time that Theobald is ready to learn his life's profession, George has Theobald completely under his control. George thinks about the occupation Theobald should enter, and feels no need to ask Theobald what he wants to do. Finally it is decided that he should become a clergyman. George's best reason for Theobald entering the ministry is economics. Having a clergyman in the family will mean good business for a publisher of religious books.

Theobald is feeble in mind and body from birth. Having to live under the repression of his father's strict discipline only increases his fragility. Theobald seldom disobeys his father after he becomes a physically mature man, and if he shows the slightest disloyalty, a small threat about being left out of his father's will suppresses all signs of rebellion. Until George Pontifex dies, Theobald finds little happiness.

\(^8\)Butler, *The Way of All Flesh*, p. 22.
Butler uses the character of Theobald Pontifex to show how weak children succumb to parental tyranny. With Ernest Pontifex, Butler explains that Victorian attitudes toward childhood discipline were not tolerated by all children. If George Pontifex is a stern father, Theobald must be judged a cruel one. Butler comments upon the reason Theobald is a failure as a parent:

It might have been better if Theobald in his younger days had kicked more against his father: the fact that he had not done so encouraged him to expect the most implicit obedience from his own children . . . . His danger, he said (and so again did Christina), would be in the direction of being too indulgent; he must be on guard against this, for no duty could be more important than that of teaching a child to obey its parents in all things.9

Consequently, Theobald is disappointed when Christina has children and not small gentlemen. Theobald feels that maturity must be forced upon youngsters in early life so they can become "full-grown clergymen in priest's orders—of moderate views, but inclining rather to Evangelicalism."10 To cultivate the proper attitude in Ernest, Theobald "thrashes" him:

9Ibid., p. 87.
10Ibid.
Before Ernest could well crawl he was taught to kneel; before he could well speak he was taught to lisp the Lord's Prayer, and the general confession. How was it possible that these things could be taught too early? If his attention flagged or his memory failed him, here was an ill weed which would grow apace unless it were plucked out immediately, and the only way to pluck it out was to whip him.11

Theobald's severe attitude toward Ernest is caused not just by the repressive influence of George Pontifex. He is under constant pressure to be a "kind of human Sunday" in the community of Battersby.12 When Theobald finishes his day's work, he returns to the one environment where all fathers can relieve their daily tensions—the home:

His [Theobald's] home is his castle as much as that of any other Englishman, and with him, as with others, unnatural tension in public is followed by exhaustion when tension is no longer necessary. His children are the most defenseless things he can reach, and it is on them in nine cases out of ten he will relieve his mind.13

One example critics often cite as the best illustration of inhuman Victorian discipline is Ernest's "enunciation" lesson. It is a family custom for Sunday guests to be

11Ibid., p. 88.

12For a detailed discussion of the pressures of Theobald's occupation see pp. 43-44, 52 above.

entertained with hymns sung by Theobald's children.

On the particular Sunday Butler describes, Ernest has the honor of choosing the hymns. Ernest loves music and enjoys singing when his father allows him the opportunity. When he picks his favorite hymn, Theobald notices that he mispronounces the title. Instead of recognizing that Ernest's mistake is caused by a common problem some children have in pronouncing a hard c, Theobald tries to make him say the title correctly. To make matters worse, Ernest does not realize he is making the error, so he keeps repeating his mistake. Theobald does not attempt to understand Ernest's problem, and does not explain to Ernest why he is so angry. In one of the most maddening scenes in the novel, Butler describes Ernest's senseless punishment:

"Very well Ernest," said his father, catching him angrily by the shoulder. "I have done my best to save you, but if you will have it so, you will," and he lugged the little wretch, crying by anticipation, out of the room. A few minutes more and we could hear screams coming from the dining-room . . . and knew that poor Ernest was being beaten. 14

A few minutes after this obvious display of Theobald's vehemence, he decides to call all the family servants

14Ibid., p. 96.
for their daily prayer meeting. Butler closes this chapter with the sardonic words, "[Theobald] rang the bell for them, [the servants] red-handed as he was."

When a child has to endure many chastisements from a father, he often retreats to the care of a loveable mother. Sadly, Ernest realizes he cannot find the love he needs from Christina Pontifex. Christina has the same faults Butler found in his own mother: she is a hypocrite, and a dreamer. John Ervine in his article "The Centenary of Butler" explains that Christina is a hypocrite because she loves her husband too much and Ernest too little. In explanation, Christina believes she should be so devoted to her husband that she supports Theobald's opinions on every subject. Her steadfast dedication soon leads to her blindness of Theobald's faults and her awareness of the many failings of Ernest. Accordingly, Christina also makes it her duty to extract secrets from her children after bribing them with short sessions of motherly affection. As Phillip Henderson comments, Christina learns Ernest's secret feelings and always rushes to tell Theobald all her information. This

practice—he continues—harms Ernest as much as Theobald's beatings.\textsuperscript{16} Even if Ernest wants to talk to Christina, he finds it extremely hard to communicate. Because she feels the devout Christian life she leads with Theobald will gain her earthly and heavenly fame, Christina passes her idle hours in dreaming of her future rewards. Of course, these reveries seem unintelligible to a young boy. Abel Chevally comments upon Christina's impractical state of mind:

She \{Christina\} escapes through imagination, becomes one of those Anglican mothers vain in virtue, who glory in, and wear themselves out with, castles in Spain and castles in Paradise, unintentionally tormenting their children with scruples and mysteries.\textsuperscript{17}

Christina's faults do not cause the physical pain that Theobald's do, but they make Ernest's childhood become filled with unnecessary anguish.

When children mature, parents usually worry less about discipline. Yet, Theobald and Christina believe Ernest needs more parental control as he becomes older, and continue their repression of Ernest with increased mental punishment. As Ernest grows larger, it is

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{17}Abel Chevalley, \textit{The Modern English Novel} (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1925), pp. 102-103.
\end{itemize}
awkward for him to receive his usual whippings. Instead, Hugh Kingsmill declares that Theobald and Christina like to compare his behavior with that of other children. Invariably, Ernest is always the naughtiest child. Kingsmill views this type of comparison as damaging to a child's personality, and says that Victorian parents usually continue the lecture by declaring how good they are for bringing the child into the world.¹⁸

Besides these needless comparisons, Theobald and Christina also employ other mental cruelties to discipline Ernest. When Ernest participates in simple school-boy pranks, his parents go to extremes in questioning their son about his involvement. Ernest is physically weak because he has never been allowed to enjoy childhood games. Furthermore, he has a weak mind that is forced to account for too many minor sins. With these two weaknesses together, Ernest can not withstand the stress of the examination that Theobald and Christina subject him to:

¹⁸Kingsmill, After Puritanism, p. 66.
He [Ernest] was examined, re-examined, cross-examined, sent to the retirement of his bedroom and cross-examined again. . . . No matter how awful was the depravity revealed to them, the pair never flinched, but probed and probed, till they were on the point of reaching subjects more delicate than they had yet touched upon. Ernest's unconscious self took the matter up and made a resistance to which his conscious self was unequal, by tumbling off his chair in a fit of fainting.19

This incident does not result in permanent physical damage to Ernest, but nervous excitement causes him to be confined to bed for a few days. Theobald and Christina feel no responsibility at all for Ernest's sickness. They plan an even more effective way of harming their son as he begins to consider entering a profession.

Theobald's ignorance of raising a child is only exceeded by his ignorance of the world. Being forced into his vocation, he had entered the clergy without any knowledge of other occupations. In brief, he knew only how to become a clergyman. Writing of Theobald's decision concerning Ernest's profession, Butler reveals how limited Ernest's future is. Theobald feels that business is a respectable occupation, but he does not know anyone who can help Ernest begin in this field.

Theobald also opposes Ernest's studying at the Bar. Although he considers a barrister's position a decent one, Theobald has no interest in law. Medicine is out of the question. Medical students are "subjected to ordeals and temptations" that Theobald and Christina will not allow Ernest to experience. On Theobald's list of acceptable occupations, only the clergy is not stricken. Theobald knows all about ordination, so the church becomes Ernest's only choice.\textsuperscript{20}

Along with his limited knowledge of other occupations, Theobald expects his son to follow family tradition and continue in his own profession. A Victorian parent would think a son's exploration of various types of work a waste of time because enjoyment of one's occupation was not important. Yet in Ernest's life, he eventually finds happiness when he breaks from his father's influence and discovers his own means of making a living.

Ernest's life continues to be controlled by Theobald's authority until he meets Althea Pontifex—Theobald's sister. She is Butler's alternative for the type of Victorian parent portrayed in Theobald. Even though she dies before Ernest enters Cambridge, her refreshing presence

\textsuperscript{20}Ibid., p. 198.
at Shrewsbury gives Ernest freedom of expression he never receives from Theobald and Christina. While Ernest is at Shrewsbury, he already possesses a "vitality" in his personality that is absent in dull Theobald. 21 Althea is different from Theobald and Christina in every way. While Theobald stresses harsh discipline, Althea thinks that Ernest should develop his creative abilities without restraint. While Christina will not find time to love Ernest, Althea can not find enough ways to express her love. Lee Holt says that Althea would not have been a typical Victorian mother at all. She expresses her love for Ernest too much to be typical. 22

Butler draws a bleak picture of the Victorian family in *The Way of All Flesh*. The family (according to Butler) was an institution of cruelty for Victorian children—not the source of love it should have been. Without the love and monetary aid from Althea, Ernest Pontifex would never have found any escape from his life at home. Indeed, Butler and Ernest experience familial conditions common


in the nineteenth century. Mrs. Garnett, while shielding the Butler family reputation, inadvertently discloses the "commonplace" environment of the most respectable of all Victorian households—the village parsonage:

Really, as people go, there was even less of domestic tyranny, of household gloom and feminine cattishness, about the Butler family than in the commonplace parsonage.23

If the ordinary parsonage had an environment like this, what could be said of the typical Victorian parishioner's home? The social criticism of the family in The Way of All Flesh was apparently no overstatement.

CHAPTER V

The Victorian Problem and Butler's Solutions

Butler leveled social criticism against Victorian society with devastating results. He felt that educators, clergymen, and parents controlled society and stifled man's natural desire to be free. Butler thought that Victorian schoolmasters and professors should not have the venerable positions they possessed because they were not dedicated scholars or teachers. In short, they were just clever charlatans. Also clergymen had an honorable status in the Victorian community. They were viewed as perfect examples of Victorian propriety. Yet Butler knew that clergymen were not as angelic as they were generally assumed to be. They were just professionals at disguising their natural human feelings in public. When they finished a day of suppressing their honest emotions (so society could follow their example) they returned home to vent their unchristian tensions on their families. Parents exerted an even greater influence on individuals in Victorian society. Because rigid attitudes toward
proper behavior were the prevailing custom, parents trained children to be ladies and gentlemen at very early ages. If a child behaved in a manner not deemed "normal," the parents felt that whipping was the only remedy. As children matured, parental authority was seldom lessened. As a consequence, restraint was the order of the day and educators, clergymen and parents made sure that their orders were carried out. All of Victorian society suffered from one general problem—a lack of freedom.

Butler portrayed his three social types in *The Way of All Flesh* so well, that he caused Victorian society to reevaluate their sacred status. Yet Butler did not destroy the reputations of individual Victorian community leaders and blind himself to the results of his criticism. He wanted to reshape his society with constructive solutions to the problems he raised. To free Victorian society of its many restrictions, Butler introduced his life-and-habit theory. The life-and-habit theory originated in Butler's biological study called *Life and Habit* (1878). The theory generally concerns Butler's idea of unconscious memory as a substitute for Charles Darwin's theory of natural selection. After
Butler wrote his study about the life-and-habit concept, he rewrote *The Way of All Flesh* in order to pose his theory as a solution to the problems of society and to explain it to his readers by illustrating it in the plot.¹ He felt that in stifling Victorian society, educators, clergymen, and parents were preventing the natural evolution of man, which he described in his evolutionary study, *Life and Habit*.

To understand Butler's life-and-habit theory, one must first begin with the basic idea of pre-natal intelligence. G. D. H. Cole explains that this pre-natal knowledge is "passed on" from all preceding generations to infants in their pre-natal stage of growth. This intelligence in its simplest form is often referred to as instinct, e.g. how an infant knows to position himself in a mother's womb. Of course as human beings mature, they are confronted with an increasingly complex world and they can no longer rely on their simplest instincts to survive.² Since—as Butler says—the simplest instincts, such as breathing and positioning in the womb are acquired by man's most primitive ancestors, he can inherit much

¹For a detailed discussion of the role that Butler's work *Life and Habit* played in his own life see pp. 15-18 above.

more sophisticated knowledge from more recent ancestors. For example, skill in playing the piano might be inherited from one's grandfather. Thus modern man may inherit skills that enable him to solve problems that require complicated actions. After these complicated actions are mastered, they become habit and enter his unconscious mind. When action becomes unconscious, it can be inherited by the next generation regardless of its complicated nature. The only conditions essential to the acquisition of this inherited knowledge are a rationally moderate mind and an environment conducive to exposing natural actions. Theobald Pontifex is Butler's best example of a man who has been denied his chance to inherit his ancestral intelligence. He does not have any opportunity to discover his instinctual abilities for selling merchandise or working with wood (his father's and grandfather's professions) because he is thrust into the church—an entirely different environment from that of his ancestral past.

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5 Jones, Butler: A Memoir, 2: 3.
Certainl y the ministry is not Theobald's own idea of a suitable occupation. His father forces him into this new and incompatible life. The Church cannot rekindle the ancestral knowledge that lies in Theobald's unconscious mind for two reasons. First his inherited ancestral skills have not prepared him for this vocation. In addition, Butler suggests the Church does not provide him with the opportunity to practice rational moderation—the second condition necessary for acquiring inherited ancestral talent and skills.

One characteristic of a rationally moderate man is his hatred of dogmatism.6 A man of this nature practices occasional inconsistency in order to avoid extremism of any kind.7 When he has learned to live without a total commitment to anything, a rationally moderate man is free to discover his ancestral intelligence if he encounters an environment that prompts him to employ it. If Theobald had defied his father's wishes and had refused to enter the Church, he could have avoided the restrictions a clerical life placed on his mind and his way of life. As it was,


Theobald went to Cambridge and learned to find only pure good or pure evil in the world. He is also trained to live a strict life with little pleasure. Every time he attempts to act on the basis of his own thought, his father wrenches him back to his clerical duty. G. N. Sharma says that Theobald becomes a typical Victorian Puritan who spends his lifetime deciding what is right and what is wrong.

When George Pontifex pushes Theobald into the clergy, the Pontifex ancestral intelligence stagnates. Leo Henkin describes the first chapters of the novel as Butler's attempt to show the Pontifex "cell transmitted without modification" from John Pontifex to Ernest. Clara Stillman calls John Pontifex the best ancestral intelligence that resides in the Pontifex past. Ernest's great-grandfather was a man who possessed a calm attitude about life and had reserves of strength that could be passed on to later generations. Most of all, John had the natural

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grace of rational moderation that made him receptive to all the instinctual knowledge of the Pontifex ancestry. In John Pontifex, Butler has the perfect alternative character for Theobald.\textsuperscript{12}

Butler uses symbolic episodes in the novel to show the recurrence of great-grandfather John's intellect in Ernest. First of all, John attempts to build an organ for the village church and he is very successful in his efforts. He has no training in organ building but he instinctively knows how to apply his woodworking experience and achieve miraculous results. William Marshall traces the role of music in Butler's work and views it as an underlying means for revealing the life-and-habit theory. Marshall also points out that George is absorbed by his business and music means nothing to him at all. Theobald hates music, and certainly lacks the skill to construct an organ. He knows two tunes and never whistles them correctly. Using musical knowledge as a basis for his assertion, Marshall says that Theobald has forced himself as far away from ancestral knowledge as possible. When Althea Pontifex enters Ernest's life, she

suggests that he construct an organ because she senses his deep love of music. With no training at all, Ernest builds an organ with intelligence inherited from his past. Ernest finds freedom from his repressive home environment, and discovers he has inherited great-grandfather John's skills.

Sadly, Ernest does not savor his new-found freedom very long. Althea dies and he goes to Cambridge. The next time Ernest is exposed to enough freedom for Butler's life-and-habit principle to operate, he has to draw upon his ancestral intelligence in order to survive. U. C. Knoepflmacher believes that when Ernest leaves prison and escapes his parents, he lives with enough freedom to draw upon the Pontifex knowledge. Instinctively feeling that he should not enter a gentlemanly occupation, he becomes a tailor. He has very little training for this vocation, but he has a mysterious intuition that causes him to succeed. Ernest would have continued his new occupation, but his alcoholic wife, Ellen, drinks his business into bankruptcy. Ernest leaves Ellen and quits

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tailoring. Again, he is free to discover his ancestral intelligence. This new freedom causes him to realize that he can make a personal contribution to the collective intelligence of the Pontifex family. Since Ernest left Cambridge, he has learned to think and write by educating himself. Now he can combine his ability to think and write with the natural grace he has inherited from his great-grandfather, and he can live a life that is not incompatible with his ancestral past.\textsuperscript{15} Ernest becomes a writer who lives with rational moderation as his guiding principle:

Then he [Ernest] saw also that it matters little what profession, whether religion or irreligion, a man may take, provided only he follows it out with charitable inconsistency, and without insisting on it to the bitter end. It is in the uncomprisingness with which dogma is held and not in the dogma or want of dogma that the danger lies.\textsuperscript{16}

Ernest never becomes a popular author. As William Marshall explains, he is too content to write what he desires. He realizes that many people will not care enough to read his books because they do not know what they mean. However he feels that the public will understand the importance of his

\textsuperscript{15}Stillman, \textit{Samuel Butler: Mid-Victorian}, p. 199.

message after they allow themselves to inherit the unconscious intelligence of their ancestors.\textsuperscript{17}

Ernest becomes a man who does not need sympathy from others to survive. Also he does not expect a great deal from life, nor does he want much. Consequently, he knows that it is best not to give life back too much in return. He wants to be reasonably happy and intends to practice "mild stoicism" in order to enjoy his "mild hedonism."\textsuperscript{18} In brief, he becomes totally receptive to his unconscious knowledge because he learns to live by the rules of Butler's rational moderation:

He had lost his faith in Christianity, but his faith in something—he knew not what, but that there was a something as yet but darkly known, which made right right and wrong wrong—his faith in this grew stronger and stronger.\textsuperscript{19}

Ernest, at the end of the novel, tries to insure that the repressions of his childhood do not reoccur in the lives of the two children he had by Ellen. He knows that he might have inherited George and Theobald's horrible attitude toward child-rearing, so he pays for his children to live


\textsuperscript{19}Butler, \textit{Way of All Flesh}, p. 298.
with a rural family. Lee Holt also says that Ernest does not want his own son and daughter to lose their chance for inheriting John Pontifex's intelligence by having to live away from a rural setting. Butler's ending to The Way of All Flesh has been attacked by many critics. Ernest seems to be shirking his duties when he "gives away" his children. Butler knew that Ernest's radical plan of child-rearing would shock his Victorian readers and Arnold Silver explains why he uses it:

He assaulted with devastating finality a system which had lost its rationale even while it continued to damage the lives of thousands of children.21


CHAPTER VI
CONCLUSIONS

Summary, The Reputation of The Way of All Flesh and Its Influence

For the post-World-War-I generation, Samuel Butler could do no wrong. Phillip Henderson says The Way of All Flesh "came into its own" when young men returned from the war and criticized their elders who were responsible for it.\(^1\) Richard Altick describes the post-war social climate that helped make Butler's work so famous: "The Victorian overevaluation of themselves was transformed into their children's exaggerated underestimation."\(^2\) The Way of All Flesh declared that this young generation's hatred was warranted by the older generation's behavior.\(^3\) Educators, clergymen and parents felt the power of Butler's social criticism more than any other social types. All three of


these respected figures of Victorian society made Ernest Pontifex live with unnecessary restraint upon his life. As young people read of Ernest's repressive life, they felt that Butler could be describing their own lives. Even Butler's evolutionary theories gained some acceptance by Victorian society. When Butler's social criticism began to be taken seriously, people began to consider the validity of his social remedies. The rational-moderation concept of a mind freed from the restrictions of dogmatism and a repressive environment sounded like a wholesome substitute for the pressures felt by a typical Victorian mind. Also the life-and-habit theory seemed to be a good excuse for young men to choose their own occupations instead of being pushed up the social ladder by their parents. After a man started his new job, he would know if he were suited for it if he had an instinctual success. Of course this had to be due to Butler's concept of inherited intelligence that returns from some long-forgotten ancestor. By 1920, Butler's sociological novel was so accepted that it was widely read in England, America, France and Germany.  

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However, public distaste for Victorianism did not last long. Helmut Gerber reveals that when Victorian-hating became less fashionable, critics began to revise their overevaluation of Butler's *Way of All Flesh*.\(^5\)

Frederick Karl in *The Age of Fiction* relates that the most common criticisms deal with Butler's narrator. Butler sometimes uses Edward Overton as narrator, at other times, Ernest Pontifex. At still other times the novel is controlled by the omniscient author. Also Butler never makes Edward Overton a "real" character with adequate description even though he is mentioned throughout the book. Other weaknesses occur in the latter part of the novel. After Ernest is separated from Ellen, the narrative becomes too "sketchy." When Ernest's love of his children needs some explanation, Butler does not furnish it.\(^6\)

The most damaging criticism can be found in Malcolm Muggeridge's *Ernest Atheist: A Study of Samuel Butler*. Muggeridge says that Butler has a malformed personality and reads his own psychological shortcomings into


Victorian society. He further believes that Butler deliberately nurses his hatred of society until he cannot be honest in his criticism.\(^7\) Morton Zabel's account of Muggeridge's *Earnest Atheist* shows more objectivity than most readers could achieve when reading Muggeridge's powerful attack in 1936. Zabel thinks that Butler can only be reproved for not developing himself fully as an artist. Muggeridge becomes too negative (because of his own extreme resentment) and cannot judge Butler fairly.\(^8\)

Robert Shafer thinks that the technical aspects and social criticism of *The Way of All Flesh* are not all that should receive negative evaluation. In his *Christianity and Naturalism*, Shafer points out that Butler does not reveal the comprehensive outcome of his life-and-habit theory. In brief, the theory will eventually cause man to "sink from the immitigable evil of conscious existence" to a life of total unconsciousness. Why should man live if he is unconscious of his existence? Shafer knows that the theory's weakness is a major one, but he admires Butler's "acute and consistent" mind for including

\(^7\)Muggeridge, *Earnest Atheist*, pp. ix-xx.

"self-destroying" thoughts in its make-up. Moreover, other Victorian thinkers (he cites Huxley and Arnold) are less thorough in their philosophical investigations.9

Although Butler's novel has its obvious flaws, today it is considered a minor classic of English fiction. Since the publication of the novel in 1903, several books dealing with "conflict of spirit" have changed the modern world.10 Three works patterned after Butler's example are Somerset Maugham's Of Human Bondage, James Joyce's Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, and D. H. Lawrence's Sons and Lovers. All are autobiographical novels dealing with youthful rebellion against established society. All three novels were published after Butler's Way of All Flesh had gained popularity. Maugham openly acknowledges his debt to Butler's Way of All Flesh in a 1950 edition of his autobiographical novel.11 Angus Wilson states that Maugham's Reverend Carey is just as repressive to Phillip as Theobald is to Ernest.12 Also striking parallels may be drawn


10Zabel, Craft and Character, p. 110.


between Maugham's attacks on education and religion and those found in The Way of All Flesh.13 While James Joyce raises the son-versus-father battle to a higher artistic plane, Butler's influence on the novel is apparent. William York Tindall notes that "literary convention" made Joyce create Stephen Dedalus's hatred of Simon in A Portrait despite Joyce's admiration of his real father.14 Not only does Stephen suffer from the restrictions of Simon, he also finds himself surrounded by Jesuit "fathers" at school who want to suppress his freedom of expression.15 Stephen spurns society—Catholic Church, family, and Irish tradition—and becomes the alienated artist. Frederick Karl suggests that Butler's ending in The Way of All Flesh foreshadows Joyce's Portrait because Stephen also rejects his own repressive society. Stephen is also content to live with his ideas (like Ernest) even though they are not accepted by society.16 D. H. Lawrence's Sons and Lovers portrays Paul Morel ridding himself of the shackles of a middle-class existence and a repressive mother in order to

13Calder, Maugham and The Quest, p. 85.


16Karl, Age of Fiction, p. 328.
find a new life of his own. Lawrence's treatment of the theme of youthful rebellion is a variation of Butler's theme although Lawrence probes much deeper into man's inner reality. The influence of The Way of All Flesh can also be discerned in Lawrence's "blood consciousness." John Raleigh states that Lawrence's need to recapture the "primal values" of earlier years is clearly related to Butler's search for unconscious knowledge in John Pontifex. E. M. Forster stresses Butler's use of rational moderation in his work Howard's End. Like Ernest, Margaret Schlegal is receptive to life because she does not believe in extremes. Lee Holt states that Margaret recalls Butler's Ernest to mind because she lives a life of inner peace while bending to life's necessities in order to survive comfortably. Machine civilization affects Margaret's


life, but she lives anti-dogmatically in order to maintain an instinctive intelligence. 21

Maugham, Joyce, Lawrence, and Forster all carry Samuel Butler's social criticism into the twentieth century with their novels. All four authors adopt a different approach to Butler's ideas, but the powerful influence Butler's social criticism had on anti-Victorian thought can be felt in each author's book. Perhaps Butler's influence on other modern writers is the best way to determine his importance in literary history.

Certainly The Way of All Flesh is Butler's greatest claim to literary fame. Butler had written scathingly of Victorian society in his satires and travelogues. His letters and notebooks were filled with anti-Victorian criticism. Even biologists and literary scholars felt the power of Butler's unconventional mind as he published works that attacked their established beliefs. Yet none of Butler's works affected Victorian society so profoundly as his Way of All Flesh. Today, his work might seem outdated with the apparent "death of Victorianism." Yet, education is

still plagued by teachers who pretend to know how to teach, when they do not. Clergymen continue to feel social pressure to be perfect human beings, and some parents still feel that harsh punishment is the best way to rear a child. Butler established a trend of rebelling against a society that crushed man's natural feelings. Indeed, modern man owes a great debt to an eccentric Englishman who transformed the Victorian world and died without even suspecting his accomplishment.
WORKS CITED

Books


Journals and Magazines


Books by Samuel Butler

A First Year in Canterbury Settlement
Erewhon
The Fair Haven
Life and Habit
Evolution Old and New
Unconscious Memory
Luck or Cunning
Alps and Sanctuaries
Ex Voto
The Authoress of the Odyssey
Shakespeare's Sonnets Reconsidered
Erewhon Revisited
The Way of All Flesh
Essays on Life, Art and Science
The Notebooks of Samuel Butler