The power of creativity has boundaries, a “circumference,” but at what point is it reached? That is the question Dickinson raises and in a single poem attempts to answer from the point of view of a singing bird, the scientific curiosity of a scientist, and the creative drive of a poet. Her use of scientific terminology, her grasp of the term “circumference,” and her clever observances of the natural world gave her the utensils to compose and “test” a statement of the creative process in a poem. “At Half past Three, a single Bird” is an extraordinary exploration of the relationship between the creative person and the created, one that begs the question of limitations to the very end and allows us to answer it for ourselves.

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Twain’s HUCKLEBERRY FINN

Ten years after a visit to Salt Lake City, Twain used burlesque in Roughing It to recount his brief time among the Mormons:

The armorial crest of my own State consisted of two dissolute bears holding up the head of a dead and gone cask between them and making the pertinent remark, “UNITED, WE STAND—(hic!)—DIVIDED, WE FALL.” It was always too figurative for the author of this book. But the Mormon crest was easy. And it was simple, unostentatious, and fitted like a glove. It was a representation of a GOLDEN BEEHIVE, with the bees all at work! (110)

Scholars typically limit discussion of Twain and the Mormons to passages in Roughing It, but a latent reference in The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn (1885), two decades after Twain’s visit to Salt Lake City (1861), also merits consideration. In chapters 21–22, Huck Finn witnesses a shooting in Bricksville, Arkansas: “Old Boggs” has come to town “for his little old monthly drunk” and “to kill old Colonel Sherburn.” In his drunken state,
Boggs threatens Huck, who crosses his path—“Whar’d you come f’m boy? You prepared to die?”—and makes a blanket threat to the entire town: “the price uv coffins is a gwyne to raise” (167). The townspeople do not take Boggs’s warning seriously, but Colonel Sherburn tells Boggs he’ll give him until one o’clock to quit speaking out against him. Boggs continues his threats, and just after one o’clock, Sherburn calls Boggs out and shoots him down in the street. The townspeople carry Boggs to a drugstore, then use two Bibles to comfort him: “They laid him on the floor, and put one large Bible under his head, and opened another one and spread it on his breast” (170).

John Gerber sees this passage as a critique of Southern aristocracy symbolized by Sherburn (100, 105). Dixon Wecter describes an actual murder Twain witnessed as a child wherein Boggs seems based on a Mr. Smarr, who challenged a Hannibal merchant William Owsley (the basis for Colonel Sherburn). Wecter’s critical comparisons between the Hannibal murder and the novel scene are quite compelling. As judge, Twain’s father collected twenty-eight depositions; the verbal exchange between Boggs and Sherburn resembles Smarr and Owsley’s (272–74). However, Leo Marx notes that: “The Bible placed on Bogg’s [sic] breast is one of the few details for which no basis can be found in the twenty-eight depositions, all recorded by John M. Clemens, J. P., which survive from the actual case” (170; footnote).

Our alternate interpretation, built on Twain’s frequent religious parody and his penchant for satirizing politicians’ names, accounts for the Bible use in this scene. Twain likely did use Smarr’s killing and subsequent attempted lynching of Owsley in 1845 as a template, but he expanded it symbolically to comment on mob violence in general and to satirize in particular Lilburn W. Boggs, the former governor of Missouri, who gave an extermination order in the winter of 1838 to kill all Mormons if they did not leave Missouri. In 1842, Boggs was shot, almost fatally, and Mormon leader Joseph Smith was accused of ordering the retaliatory assassination (Boggs 107). Smith (like Owsley) was cleared of the charge in court. Smith was nevertheless lynched by a mob in 1844. A native Missourian, Twain would have been aware of this:

Hannibal lay only sixty miles away from the Mormon city Nauvoo and the Carthage, Illinois jail where Joseph Smith was murdered in 1844, when he [Twain] was nine years old. The effect of childhood knowledge on Mark Twain’s attitudes toward Mormons is not clear, but he maintained a lifelong fascination with Mormonism […] (Eliason 2)

Throughout his fiction, Twain relies heavily on names for satirical gain. For example, in “The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County,” Twain names a fighting “bull-pup” and a famous jumping frog after two politicians, President Andrew Jackson and New England Congressman “Dan’l” Webster. Twain was notorious for mocking politicians, for he firmly resented their
abuse of power and false rhetoric. It is hardly a stretch, then, that Twain would use the name Boggs to refer to the real Lilburn W. Boggs, from Independence, Missouri, a key Mormon settlement before Boggs became governor.

Old Boggs’s promise to raise the price of coffins did come true in reality: three days after Lilburn Boggs’s October 27, 1838, extermination order, a Missouri militia slaughtered seventeen Mormons on October 30 at Haun’s Mill (Blair 62–67). Many more died from exposure that winter, forced by the militia to flee Missouri on foot with only the clothes on their backs.

It also may be significant that the two Boggses, fictional and real, were polar opposites—Boggs the harmless town drunk versus Governor Boggs, murderous in fact but considered an upstanding Christian politician nevertheless. Herman Nibbelink describes how Twain frequently used narrative “to juxtapose presumed opposites so as to reveal their underlying similarities” (2). The essential similarities are that both Boggs have the same name, threaten death, and are both shot themselves, the fictitious Boggs fatally. The symbolism of the Bibles laid on the dying Boggs becomes clear: Mormons were persecuted as a threat to orthodox Christianity, which Governor Boggs “defended,” and he was himself “martyred” for that orthodoxy (for which Twain himself had little respect). In addition, when Boggs calls out to Sherburn that he is “the houn’ I’m after, and I’m a gwyne to have you, too!” there is a parallel to Lilburn W. Boggs wanting Joseph Smith’s head and (eventually) getting it—Smith was killed in a broad daylight attack, rare but identical from that point to the mob going after Sherburn in the novel.

If old Boggs represents Lilburn W. Boggs, then Colonel Sherburn should logically represent Joseph Smith. Details of the story, however, do not support exactly this. If Twain based his Boggs character on the real Boggs, why not call his Smith character “Smith”? Also, Sherburn is described as being “about fifty-five” in the novel. Smith died at age thirty-eight. Finally, and most tellingly, Smith was killed and Sherburn survived. Sherburn, then, represents not Smith but Twain himself (age fifty in 1885). The speech Sherburn gives to the mob to discourage their murderous intent is, apparently, what Twain would have said, if he had been in Joseph Smith’s unfortunate position:

Sherburn resembles “Mark Twain” a lot more closely than does Huck, who hates attention and good clothes. And the way Sherburn steps onto his porch roof and faces the crowd evokes the way Twain often began his lectures: “Sherburn never said a word—just stood there, looking down . . . [and] run his eye slow along the crowd.” (Railton)

It is not surprising that Twain denounces mob violence in the mouth of one of his characters. Given Twain’s irreligious reputation, however, it is surprising that Twain would symbolically frame himself as Sherburn, whom Twain otherwise made equivalent to Joseph Smith, the one who allegedly ordered the actual Boggs shot. Nevertheless, both textual and historical details indicate
that this may be the case and reveal that Twain’s disdain for orthodox and political Christianity outweighed his reservations about Mormons.

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Freeman’s THE REVOLT OF THE MOTHER

In the March 1969 issue of The Explicator, Edward J. Gallagher deftly outlines ways in which several of the biblical names in Mary E. Wilkins Freeman’s “The Revolt of Mother” contribute to the local color of the tale’s setting and complement the dominant domestic values of the times. Yet, although Gallagher’s discussion certainly adds to our appreciation and understanding of the tale, further consideration, particularly of Freeman’s choice of the names Sarah and Adoniram, indicates a subtle subversion of the presumed gender stereotypes prevalent in the New England of the day. In Genesis, as in Freeman’s tale, Sarah is portrayed as a figure of considerable force, someone who has a dramatic influence upon her husband and the generations to follow. Similarly, Adoniram, against whom Sarah “revolts,” is, like his biblical namesake, a taskmaster who himself must contend with an unexpected insurrection.

Freeman portrays Sarah Penn, a long-suffering wife and mother, as having led a life of deprivation and as sacrificing her material wants to support her husband, her family, and their farm. As the story develops, however, we see her taking charge, initiating changes that will dramatically alter her relationship with her husband and the attitudes of her children. The author, herself, protested that Sarah’s revolt against her husband was not true to the New