

ANALYSIS

A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court (1889)

Mark Twain

(1835-1910)

“It is in *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*--a curious medley, half philippic and half farce--that Mark Twain's passion for justice rises to white heat. The book has been grossly misunderstood. It is not an attack on chivalry--at least not primarily; it is rather an attack on thirteen centuries of reputed Christian civilization that under pretense of serving God has enslaved and despoiled the children of God. The keen satire is given point and edge by the long tragic perspective. Thirteen centuries heavy with sorrow and misery and frustrated hopes--a meaningless succession of foolish and futile generations, wandering in fogs of their own brewing, hagridden by superstitions, deceived and exploited by priest and noble, with no will to be free--here is a perspective to correct our callow enthusiasms, our revolutionary hopes! Why indeed should we expect men to possess the will to freedom seeing that each generation is molded after the likeness of the past and none has been free?

There is change, advance and recession, but the story of the generations is no more than a 'sad drift between the eternities,' without purpose or meaning. In the brain of the Connecticut Yankee are secrets hidden from the children of King Arthur's time--a curious ability to use the forces of nature, some glimmerings of social justice. But to what purpose have Hartford and the nineteenth century used their knowledge? It is a world of slaves still as it was in King Arthur's day. The human animal cannot lift himself to heaven by his own bootstraps, and heaven will not stoop to lift him. For a 'clammy atmosphere of reverence, respect, deference,' it has substituted smartness, vulgarity, irreverence.

As one slips back and forth between the two worlds the satire takes on vaster perspectives; it cuts deep into all civilizations, for all alike are a sham, all have issued from the conquest of man's native intelligence by his superstitions that are too useful to his masters to be dissipated. Clearly in Mark Twain's philosophy of history the hopes of the Enlightenment are fading. Passionately dedicated to the program of the Enlightenment--freedom, individuality, humanitarianism, democracy--his faith in reason, free will, progress, was burning low, in presence of the historical record. The determinism that lurked at the bottom of John Locke's psychology, unperceived by the French idealists, was revealing itself to Mark Twain and he was already trimming his sails to the chill winds blowing from the outer spaces of a mechanistic cosmos.

More immediately of course *A Connecticut Yankee* is an attack on the aristocratic romanticism of Sir Walter. There is little loitering in the great hall--except to comment on the coarseness of the knights and ladies--and much poking about in unlovely secret places where one comes upon a rare collection of human animals thrust away in the oubliettes or pigging together in mean huts. Few chapters in American literature are so noble...so beautiful in their stern simplicity, as certain sketches of the king's progress through his realm--not a royal progress but a peasant's. There are no tears in them, they go far beyond that. The scene in the smallpox hut where the wife is glad her husband and daughters are dead--they are either in heaven or hell, it makes little difference, for they are no longer in Britain and so are happy; and the scene of the young mother hanged for stealing a piece of cloth of an ell-s length or so, hanged that property in Britain might be safe--such pictures reveal how far he had traveled from the days of *Roughing It*.”

Vernon L. Parrington
Main Currents in American Thought III
(Harcourt 1927) 97-98

“*Innocence Abroad or A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* leaves us ashamed of Clemens twice over. His ignorance is monumental. His criticism of the priceless relics of the Middle Ages exposes his own thin culture. He appears to be a Philistine without comprehension of the children of light; and from his boorish jibes may be deduced his adequate expression of the point of view of his constituents toward

the past. His discovery that there was brutality in the feudal era; his naive amazement that the keepers of antiquity's treasures are sometimes unworthy; his senseless attacks upon Scott (who, he said, was partly responsible for the Civil War) and on Christian Science; all such barbarisms betray his illiteracy. Moreover, we are ashamed that he did not more often direct his superb talent for satire, an elevation of his sense of humor, to American foibles, as in *The Gilded Age*. Nevertheless, though his anger against culture echoes the cheapest Western journalists; though his ethical code relies merely on the simple principles of his frontier civilization, honesty and sincerity; his eloquence ennobles his diatribes."

Stanley T. Williams
American Literature
(Lippincott 1933) 123-24

"Mark Twain, the radical American, preferred always to express his opinion of monarchical societies... Like the older republican patriots, he set hatred for kings as a first article of his political creed. Of this important side of his nature the most characteristic utterances are to be found in *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1889), which deserves also to be considered one of the most thoroughly typical books yet produced by the American democracy. It is typical in method and typical in conclusion. With the brash irresponsibility of frontier vaudeville it catches up a hard, dry, obstreperous Yankee, hurries him back through thirteen centuries, and dumps him, with all his wits about him, into Camelot. Speaking in terms of literary history, the sentimentalism about the Middle Ages which had recently been feeding on Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*, William Morris's *Earthly Paradise*, the Pre-Raphaelites, and Pater, and now was languishing in the sunflower cult of Oscar Wilde. Gilbert and Sullivan had already satirized this cult in *Patience*, by exposing the affectations of the aesthetes who professed it....

Mark Twain behaves as the devil's advocate in the *Yankee*, candidly ascribing to the sixth century the abuses of other older ages as well as his own. Perhaps, since he habitually read Malory's *Morte d'Arthur* and had a natural tenderness for its chivalric postures, he even exhibits a special animus arising from civil war within himself.... To appreciate the fun of the *Yankee* one must have been accustomed to the rowdy modes of American humor; to feel its censure one must have at least a strain of the revolutionary. And yet persons equipped with neither may perceive the magnificent vigor of the narrative. It ranges from ludicrous to sublime; from the tears of hysterical laughter to the tears of broken pity."

Carl Van Doren
The American Novel 1789-1939, 23rd edition
(Macmillan 1921-1940) 52-53

"A realistic-satirical fantasy of Arthurian England... An ingenious Yankee mechanic, knocked unconscious in a fight, awakens to find himself at Camelot in A.D. 528. Imprisoned by Sir Kay the Seneschal and exhibited before the knights of the Round Table, he is condemned to death, but saves himself by posing as a magician like Merlin, predicting an eclipse, and becoming minister to King Arthur. He increases his power by applying 19th-century style knowledge of gunpowder, electricity, and industrial methods; but when he attempts to better the condition of the peasantry he meets opposition from the church, the knights, Merlin, and the sorceress Morgan le Fay. He accompanies the king in disguise on an expedition among the common people, and, when they are captured, they are rescued by the Yankee's trained troop of 500 knights on bicycles. His daughter Hello-Central becomes ill, and with his wife Alisande (Sandy) he takes her to France. Back in England, he finds his work undone. Arthur killed, the land in civil war. Gathering friends in a cave with modern armed defenses, he declares a republic, fights off an attack, but is wounded. Merlin, pretending to nurse him, puts him asleep until the 19th century."

James D. Hart
The Oxford Companion to American Literature, 5th edition
(Oxford 1941-83)

"*A Connecticut Yankee*...shows just such an ingenious mechanic as Clemens must often have met on visits to the Hartford shops of Pratt & Whitney, a Yankee who is swept back in time to Camelot. With one hand he transforms Arthurian legend into a going concern of steam and electricity; with the other, seeks to plant the seeds of egalitarianism. He remarks that in feudal society six men out of a thousand crack the whip over their fellows' backs: 'It seemed to me that what the nine hundred and ninety-four dupes needed

was a new deal.' This passage, as the late President Roosevelt testified, furnished the most memorable phrase in modern American government.

The Connecticut Yankee asserts that the mass of a nation can always produce 'the material abundance whereby to govern itself.' Yet the medieval mob is shown collectively to be gullible, vicious, invincibly ignorant, like the populace of Hannibal or Hartford, so that the Yankee sets up not a true democracy but a benign dictatorship centering in himself and his mechanical skills--a kind of technocrat's Utopia. Dazzled by the wonders of applied science, Mark Twain always hoped for social as well as technological miracles from the dynamo... Publicly Mark Twain tilted only against England's medieval institutions... The English public did not like the *Yankee*, but it liked nearly everything else of Mark Twain's, tending, like the American public, to praise most what most complied with conventional taste."

Dixon Wecter
Literary History of the United States, 3rd edition
(Macmillan 1946-63) 634, 934-35

"The basic idea was to confront Malory's romanticism with the hard-headedness of a 'smart' Yankee, who, accidentally getting transported back into the sixth century--in this aspect the book partially anticipated the many recent novels which have been based on J. W. Dunne's theory of 'Serial Time'--should, through his modern technological knowledge, succeed in making himself the 'Boss.' Mark Twain conceived his hero as 'a perfect ignoramus,' but this point of view is not maintained; making the puppet his own mouthpiece and the spokesman of modern democratic ideals, the author could hardly have withheld his own knowledge from him. In one aspect, then, the *Yankee* vaunts modernism against the romantic and historic past, but this is only a superficial aspect; those critics who see Mark Twain, in this book, as deserting the problems of his own time to take refuge in the past, and relieving his indignation by blowing off steam on the perfectly 'safe' subject of sixteenth-century England, have not read very carefully.

Yet, in truth, any misunderstanding of the *Yankee* is explicable, for the book is a hodge-podge, ranging from sublimity in the touching picture of the King in the smallpox hut to painful burlesque in the picture of Lancelot and his knights riding to the rescue on high-wheeled bicycles. It is no wonder that three 'movies' have been made of it and even a musical comedy. And if Mark Twain's basic conception is degraded in them, he had degraded it before them."

Edward Wagenknecht
Cavalcade of the American Novel
(Holt 1952) 122

"A blow received on the head during a quarrel conveys the superintendent of a Hartford arms factory back to the days of King Arthur, with all his Yankee ingenuity and know-how intact. His encounters with the world of chivalry make amusing reading; Mark Twain uses the opportunity to satirize the Old World, medieval 'chivalry,' kings, and the church. Many of the characters made famous in the various renderings of the Arthurian saga appear, but seen with the Yankee's practical, unimpressed eye. He introduces some modern inventions, and knows some things not discovered until centuries later (he has fore-knowledge of an eclipse, for example), so that he can ludicrously surprise King Arthur and his court. In one scene he transfers five hundred knights from horseback to bicycles. He marries a young girl whose speech resembles the long-winded sentences of the Germans, and they have a daughter called Hello-Central.

To his own surprise Mark Twain was 'prodigiously pleased' with the story when he reread it some years later.... In 1927 Herbert Fields wrote and produced a musical play in two acts and a prologue called *A Connecticut Yankee*, based on the book... The production was very successful and the play has frequently been revived. Movie versions were made in 1921, 1931 (with Will Rogers as the Yankee), and 1949 [with Bing Crosby as the Yankee]. It has often been dramatized on television."

Max J. Herzberg & staff
The Reader's Encyclopedia of American Literature
(Crowell 1962)

"In *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*...[the] book's chief moral, as the well-meaning Yankee discovered to his chagrin, was that the apparatus of material well-being did not insure human

progress. It was a major step away from Twain's easier view about society in his early works and travel books. He spent his remaining years plumbing the deeper subject of moral progress.

Like his own Colonel Sellers, or his brother Orion, he had great visions of the wealth to come from inventions. Try as he might he could not suppress the frontier optimism and castle-building that devoured the good Colonel, leaving him poorer but none the wiser. Twain was the first person to have a private telephone in his home. He was among the first authors to write on the typewriter, among the first to use a dictaphone, which he loved because it allowed him to ramble endlessly. He was an early user of the fountain pen and was so fond of such musical gadgets as the melodeon and teleharmonium that he had them moved from house to house with him. He early mastered, if only temporarily, the high-wheeled bicycle, producing along the way that comic masterpiece, 'Taming the Bicycle.' A machine finally ruined his bright worldly prospects and cast shadows on his whole philosophy of life: the infamous Paige Typesetter.... He purchased shares of the company, subsidized the inventor... Then the bubble burst... He who had known little but success saw before him nothing but failure, financial insecurity, and personal tragedy that helped turn him from the jaunty pioneer of *Roughing It* into the bitter cynic of *The Mysterious Stranger*."

H. Wayne Morgan
American Writers in Rebellion
(Hill & Wang 1965) 28

"*A Connecticut Yankee*...ridicules the cult of medieval feudalism, as endorsed by books like *Ivanhoe* and Carlyle's *Past and Present*, but it also keeps a certain distance from the point of view of its hero, the parody figure of Hank Morgan, the Yankee foreman: 'a perfect ignoramus,' as Twain himself described him. The book exults, like a eulogy of modern progress, in the thoroughgoing supercession of a bad old past, yet in the relentless holocaust of its closing pages it projects the darkest of premonitions about where exactly the present age must eventually lead. Utopia and apocalypse finally merge in Twain's deeply equivocal imagination. The title of Hank Morgan's manuscript, we note, is 'The Tale of the Lost Land,' and alongside the sacred democratic rage against despotic oppression runs a dreamlike current of nostalgia and elegiac regret, equally powerful. In Mark Twain's later work it is still this current, the great force behind 'Old Times' and *Huckleberry Finn*, that produces the most touching effects.

A Connecticut Yankee is full, energetic, inventive, brilliantly executed. But in terms of its further aims, it must be called a failure. The narrative intention flies all over the place. The book takes a stand, at intervals, against a score of disagreeable matters--bigotry, clerical dogma, flunkeyism, vested authority, the Idylls of the King, the awful German language...art (or rather gushing art-lovers), cant of any kind, hypocrisy, slavery of mind or body, meanness of spirit, cruelty and thoughtlessness--all of which are reasonable antagonisms; most of them are still doing service in the satirical realism of the present day. The miscellaneousness of the list suggests what goes wrong, however. The book becomes a catch-all for what was on Mark Twain's mind while he was writing it. At the same time, his ignorance or indifference concerning the full nature of the things that irritate him makes it impossible for him to develop a serious imaginative critique of them, even through the free indirections of fantasy.

There is, as always with Twain, a continual return of pleasure in the vivid clarity of particular scenes and incidents and in the racy, pungent, economical prose style. But the book as a whole will not seriously follow up its own best openings. The standing joke of the 'practical Connecticut man' set down among Tennysonized Arthurians, with the matter of Britain presented in the language of a Hartford petty bourgeois, is always there to fall back on, and though its incongruities are as suitable to major irony as to mechanical farce, the farce is what Twain gets carried away by--as if, in a parallel instance, the account of Gulliver's voyages to Brobdingnag and Lilliput were only a matter of big men and little men."

Warner Berthoff
The Ferment of Realism:
American Literature, 1884-1919
(The Free Press/Macmillan 1965) 67-68

“Hamlin Garland reported widely to his Nationalist friends that ‘Mark Twain was profoundly touched by *Looking Backward*.’ Momentarily persuaded by the current of Utopian optimism, Twain himself wrote, in an essay called ‘On Progress, Civilization, Monarchy, etc.,’ that progress was apparently inevitable, and that ‘there was no limit to human possibilities as regards human betterment.’

In *A Connecticut Yankee*, however, he dramatized both the progress and the poverty of history. The novel ostensibly dramatizes and celebrates the historical change from past to present as the transformation of chivalry into reason, savagery and brutality into kindness, slavery into freedom, a degraded populace into a well-clothed, well-educated one, fear into joy. This transformation is accomplished by the Yankee mechanic who represents the modern mind. He is ‘a Yankee of the Yankees--and practical; yet, and nearly barren of sentiment, I suppose--or poetry, in other words.’ Transposed into the sixth century, Hank Morgan soon comes to understand his historical opportunity. To the ‘dark land’ he bears the light of nineteenth-century technology, freedom of religious belief, and the American scorn of inherited titles. Soon, he has ‘the civilization of the nineteenth century booming under its very nose.’ With knights riding bicycles or playing baseball and saints used as ‘manufactories,’ he transforms the institutions and as he believes, the assumptions of feudalism. Incarnating the spirit of modernism, he projects his Utopia....

But, of course, Twain deliberately chose and portrayed a historical situation in which modern progress could not begin. Arthur’s realm, as Twain’s sources told him, had plunged into Eddaic chaos and the darkness of centuries. Hank could not, in any event, make his Utopia against history: for the history of Arthur’s kingdom was all past, fatally conclusive. The moment of light had crumbled into the dark ages. It is man himself--human evolution--that Hank has neglected to consider. Following immediately upon his affirmative dream of a republican Utopia, Hank momentarily acknowledges that ‘there are times when one would like to hang the whole human race and finish the farce.’ Brutally degraded, only in moments does the manhood of the populace assert itself; only the best of the nobility--Arthur and Lancelot--are better than children or savages.

At the end of the book only fifty-three young men--all trained in Hank’s ‘Man-Factory’--stand by him. And these, like Hank, are now committed not to the joys but the terrors of civilization. Utopia, in apocalypse, becomes the frightful dystopia of the dark ages, as Hank destroys the civilization he has envisioned and created. His technology is devoted to war, death, and destruction; thus his triumph is his inevitable defeat. Surrounded by the bodies of electrocuted knights, he is trapped by his own victory. Proclaiming his doctrine of mechanical energy without correspondingly increasing consciousness...Hank initiates not civilization but inertia. It is Hank himself, then, symbol of the nineteenth-century, who brings about the decline of history. The final victor is therefore Merlin, symbol of the most primitive superstition, who casts a thirteenth-century spell over the sleeping Hank.

A Connecticut Yankee, then, cuts both ways: against the age of chivalry, of course; but also against the machine society of the ‘80s.... Innocence and experience are both inadequate to control the movement of historical change. The knights are as helpless as children before Hank’s knowledge. But essentially, as a man, he is no less childish than they. He too struts and frets and devotes his energy to getting up startling ‘effects.’ Equally as foolish, finally, as their chivalry, his modernism is merely more deadly. Like the personae of Twain’s travel books, Hank fails to discover and is powerless to legislate his Utopian fantasies. Like them, he becomes merely an alien--from both past and present...

Attempting to create an adult narrator whose consciousness could reflect more widely and penetrate more deeply than Huckleberry Finn’s and still maintain the vernacular wisdom and the moral perception of the innocent, Twain envisioned the figure of the hardheaded Yankee mechanic as his solution. But in *A Connecticut Yankee* the wanderer disintegrates into the clown. Hank becomes the victim of his technological jokes. An adult Huck Finn, he is besieged by history. He is lost rather than freed. Time has no Virgin Land, history no Eden, to save Hank from himself. Moreover, the totality of Twain’s criticism in the book, the suggestion of a pen warmed up in hell, threatened to break through literary convention and so alienate the audience whose continuing favor Twain seemed to require--as an emotional, even more than as a financial, support. Much like Henry James, who was going through a crisis in popularity during these same years, Twain needed the assurance that he was popular. But now his deepest impulses were pulling him away from his audience. He would more and more scorn all that the collective mind affirmed, and

consequently would lose the popular following which he seemed so much to need. He began his career in mass subscription selling, and ended it by printing his books anonymously or privately, or even leaving them in manuscript...

Although he needed to discern teleology in history in order to fall in with the current popularity of Utopian optimism and the traditional American faith in inevitable progress, he nonetheless depicted a nightmare of progress ending in retrogression; he affirmed only a history of decline. Even the limited faith he expressed in American democracy in *A Connecticut Yankee*, furthermore, he burlesqued and scorned in his very next book, *An American Claimant* (1892).”

Jay Martin
Harvests of Change: American Literature 1865-1914
(Prentice-Hall 1967) 179-81

Michael Hollister (2015)