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Major Work Review

It is not often that one finds a book that is both exciting and profound, simultaneously full of adventure and full of meaning. But one novel that does fit this description is *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* by Mark Twain. At the same time that protagonist Hank Morgan narrowly escapes executions and performs heroic deeds, he ponders timeless questions about society, politics, and human nature, and at the same time that Hank determines to establish a democratic republic, his darker side is revealed in his equally strong thirst for power. In its combination of adventure and social commentary, *A Connecticut Yankee* is similar to Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. But *A Connecticut Yankee*—in its more poignant depiction of human suffering, its narration by an adult closer in personality to Twain, and its deeper moral complexity—gives the reader an additional layer of insight and thought provocation that *Huck Finn* does not. Because it is a stronger and more powerful novel, but one that still exhibits Twain's characteristic humor and satire, *A Connecticut Yankee* should replace *Huck Finn* in the AP-English course.

Though his focus is social commentary, Twain begins *A Connecticut Yankee* with a touch of science fiction. Hank Morgan, a factory superintendent and loyal citizen of Connecticut, is transported from the nineteenth century to 528 A.D. after being hit over the head with a crowbar. As Hank awakens, he is captured by an armored knight and taken to Camelot, where he is brought before King Arthur's court as a prisoner. From his

dungeon cell, Hank talks with a page named Clarence, whose superstitious nature gives the Yankee an idea for escape. As guards lead Hank to the place of his execution, he proclaims himself a wizard before the crowd at exactly the same moment that a solar eclipse begins to darken the sky. Filled with consternation, King Arthur hastily agrees to the Yankee's demands that he be freed and made the king's advisor. As the eclipse starts to fade, Hank shouts, "Let the enchantment dissolve and pass harmless away!" (Twain 44).

From this point on, Hank enjoys great esteem in his position as "The Boss" of England. Determined to transform the sixth century with the institutions and technology of the nineteenth, Hank establishes factories, public schools, telegraph and telephone systems, and even a West Point military academy, all of which are supervised by Clarence. But the influential Yankee is still subject to the king's will, as is seen when Arthur orders Hank to embark on a quest with a woman whom Hank calls Sandy to rescue four dozen maidens from a castle guarded by ogres (as it turns out, the maidens are actually pigs trapped in a pigsty). The king insists on joining Hank on his next journey—visiting peasant villages in disguise so as to better understand the common people; while Hank enjoys the king's companionship, Arthur's inability to convincingly play an ordinary peasant eventually leads him and Hank to be sentenced to death, an ordeal from which they are narrowly saved by Launcelot and five hundred other knights on bicycles.

Throughout these adventures, England steadily continues to modernize. Hank eventually marries Sandy and has a child, and he introduces the game of baseball to supplant jousting tournaments as a way for the nobles to let off steam. But events soon

take a turn for the worse. While Hank is away, a civil war breaks out, and King Arthur is killed. When the Catholic Church turns most of England against modernization, Hank, Clarence, and sixty other young men who remain committed to the Republic flee to a cave that Clarence has armed for war. In the ensuing Battle of the Sand Belt, the republican forces massacre 25,000 opposing knights with bombs and electricity, but the encircling miasma created by the mass of putrescent corpses soon threatens to kill the Yankee's own men. At this point, Hank falls into a thirteen-hundred-year sleep that returns him to his own century.

The conclusion to the novel is unsettling, but it illustrates one of *A Connecticut Yankee's* strongest aspects: presentation of troubling ethical situations that provoke the reader to contemplation. The Battle of the Sand Belt dramatically illustrates the brutality that sometimes accompanies the single-minded pursuit of a noble goal, such as Hank's dream of establishing a republic. Although Twain published his novel in 1889, this tendency—and the mass destruction that is its consequence—could easily be applied to the two world wars of the twentieth century (Inge xv), as well as to American engagements in the Philippines, Vietnam, and Iraq.

Another intriguing idea is raised when Hank and Sandy meet farmers on their journey to rescue the maidens. The feudal obligations that these “freemen” endure remind Hank of the seigniorial system in pre-Revolutionary France, an observation that prompts the Yankee to proclaim that “There were two ‘Reigns of Terror,’ if we would but remember it and consider it” (Twain 91). The first was the feudal oppression of millions of peasants over the centuries, and the second was the execution of ten thousand people during the radical phase of the French Revolution. Hank continues:

[O]ur shudders are all for the “horrors” of the minor Terror, the momentary Terror, so to speak; whereas, what is the horror of swift death by the axe compared with life-long death from hunger, cold, insult, cruelty, and heart-break?[...] A city cemetery could contain the coffins filled by that brief Terror which we have all been so diligently taught to shiver at and mourn over; but all France could hardly contain the coffins filled by that [...] unspeakably bitter and awful Terror which none of us has been taught to see in its vastness or pity as it deserves. (Twain 91-92)

While readers may not agree with Hank’s defense of the Reign of Terror, they must at least admit that he makes a powerful argument challenging conventional views of the French Revolution. The language of Hank’s statement might also provoke discussion of current issues, such as whether America’s focus on terrorism diverts attention and funding from poverty, hunger, and AIDS, which take millions of lives every year.

The Battle of the Sand Belt and Hank’s “Two Reigns of Terror” speech do not just encourage thought in the reader; they also reveal the complexity of the story’s protagonist, another major strength of Twain’s work. At the beginning, Hank rests his hopes in bloodless change, such as his creation of a “Man Factory,” to which he sends promising citizens for training in the practice of democracy. Moreover, Hank favors gradual reform to rapid revolution: “I was not going to do the thing in [a] sudden way.[...] No, I had been going cautiously all the while” (Twain 70). But Hank begins to have second thoughts when, during his quest with Sandy, he frees wrongly held prisoners only to see them feel no resentment toward their oppressors:

This was not the sort of experience for a statesman to encounter who was planning out a peaceful revolution in his mind. For it could not help bringing up the un-get-aroundable fact that [...] no people in the world ever did achieve their freedom by goody-goody talk and moral suasion: it being immutable law that all revolutions that will succeed, must *begin* in blood[...]. (Twain 141)

Though Hank continues to attempt his peaceful reforms, this gradual change in his attitude may explain his eventual ruthlessness at the Battle of the Sand Belt.

Hank's ambivalence between bloodless change and violent revolution is paralleled by an internal conflict between democratic egalitarianism and enlightened despotism (Royal). Hank repeatedly objurgates the institution of nobility: "small 'independent' farmers, artisans, etc. [...] were about all of [the population] that was useful, or worth saving[...]; and to subtract them would have been to subtract the Nation and leave behind some dregs, some refuse, in the shape of a king, nobility, and gentry" (Twain 89). Hank quotes with pride the constitution of his home state: "all political power is inherent in the people, and all free governments are founded on their authority[...]" (Twain 93). But at the same time, the Connecticut Yankee displays some antidemocratic sentiments. Upon first discovering that he had been transported back to the sixth century, he determined to "boss the whole country inside of three months" (Twain 19). Hank later welcomes the lofty title of "The Boss," saying "There were very few THE's, and I was one of them" (Twain 59). When the Yankee, at the end of his travels with Sandy, restores a holy fountain before a massive crowd, "the populace [...] fell back reverently[...], as if I had been some kind of superior being—and I was. I was

aware of that” (Twain 176). The Yankee supports the common people—but only when they agree with him; when virtually all of England rises up against the Republic at the Battle of the Sand Belt, Hank refuses to relinquish his own position.

Hank’s character includes another contrast: ambivalence between progressivism and capitalism (Royal). Hank bitterly denounces the wealthy elites of society and political policies that unfairly advantage them. One picture in the book depicts a capitalist “oppressor” next to a slaveholder and a king (Twain 222). Yet at the same time, Hank intentionally brings capitalism to the sixth century. He dispatches knights with sandwich-board advertisements into the countryside to promote new products, he turns the Round Table into a stock market, and he makes use of a hermit’s incessant bowing for prayer to power a sewing machine. Hank even speaks with the language of business, as when he refuses to take over a task originally given to Merlin the magician: “It will not answer to mix methods[...]; neither would it be professional courtesy. Two of a trade must not under-bid each other. We might as well cut rates and be done with it[...]. Merlin has the contract; no other magician can touch it till he throws it up” (Twain 159). The epitome of Hank’s bifurcated ambition is his Man Factory, which employs the efficiency of a production line to produce citizens devoted to liberal democracy (Royal).

These apparently contradictory facets of Hank’s character, far from weakening the novel, actually enhance it. *A Connecticut Yankee* was the first major work in which Twain expressed multiple impulses and beliefs in one single character; his previous novels relied on interaction between characters to create disagreement (Royal).

Complexity makes Hank seem more like a real person who is capable of making mistakes and deviating from a set ideology.

Simultaneously, Hank's contradictions provide insight into Twain's own beliefs. Like his protagonist, Twain changed his mind on the wisdom of violent revolution, as he explained in an 1887 letter to William Dean Howells: "When I finished Carlyle's French Revolution in 1871, I was a Girondin; every time I have read it since, I have read it differently [...] & now I lay the book down once more, & I recognize that I am a Sansculotte!—And not a pale, characterless Sansculotte, but a Marat!" (qtd. in Inge xiv). Twain also embodied his Yankee's dual nature as progressive and capitalist. At the same time that he denounced wealthy robber barons, Twain invested \$150,000 in James W. Paige's typesetting machine (Royal) and established his own publishing firm, Charles L. Webster & Co. (Inge vii). Thus, *A Connecticut Yankee* illuminates the personality not only of its fictional protagonist but also of its author.

In addition to its thought-provoking situations and complex main character, *A Connecticut Yankee* is set apart by its humor. Twain uses absurd extremes to satirize everything from the established church and aristocratic privilege to superstition and gullibility (Inge xvi). Particularly incisive is his attack on the Arthurian legends themselves. Merlin, for example, is presented as a fake magician desperately trying to defend his reputation. When Hank is sent off on his journey with Sandy, he is forced to wear ungainly armor that prevents him from scratching himself, reaching his handkerchief, or mounting a horse without help, and when he tries to sleep at night, bugs crawl inside the armor for shelter.

Perhaps the funniest aspect of the book is its juxtaposition of nineteenth-century American English with that used in the original King Arthur stories (Baxter). While Sandy is nonplussed by “knock off,” “dunderhead,” “shut up shop,” “draw the game,” and “bank the fires” (Twain 164), Twain’s readers find amusement in “clave” (Twain 8), “holpen,” “strake” (Twain 9), and repeated use of “smote.” Additionally, Hank chides Sandy for the monotony of her stories: “Sir Marhaus the king’s son of Ireland talks like all the rest; you ought to give him a brogue, or at least a characteristic expletive[...]. You should make him say, ‘In this country, be jabbers, came never knight since it was christened, but he found strange adventures, be jabbers.’ You see how much better that sounds” (Twain 106).

While most of Twain’s humor is harmlessly enjoyable, some of it actually detracts from the novel. For example, when Hank and Sandy visit Morgan le Fay, a brutal queen who routinely kills her servants, Hank does not wish to upset his hostess by interfering with her execution of a bad composer. “I therefore considered the matter thoughtfully, and ended by having the musicians ordered into our presence to play that Sweet By and By again, which they did. Then I saw that [Morgan] was right, and gave her permission to hang the whole band” (Twain 118). Later, Hank rather carelessly describes his bombing of two knights: “Yes, it was a neat thing, very neat and pretty to see. It resembled a steamboat explosion on the Mississippi; and during the next fifteen minutes [the king and I] stood under a steady drizzle of microscopic fragments of knights and hardware and horseflesh” (Twain 217). In these instances, Twain merely meant to create humor through absurd exaggerations that were not actually intended to reflect on Hank’s character (Inge xii). But in a meaningful novel like *A Connecticut Yankee*—one

that also starkly depicts human cruelty and suffering—such grotesque humor is out of place.

An additional weakness of Twain's novel is the resort to unrealistic means of saving characters from dangerous situations. Hank knew that the eclipse of the sun that could prevent his execution would occur on the day following his imprisonment, but because the king feared the spell that Hank warned he would cast on that day, the king made the execution a day earlier. However, as Hank was about to burn at the stake, the solar eclipse he had expected for the following day took place. As it turned out, Clarence had gotten the date wrong, thinking that it was June 20 when it was in fact June 21. A similarly contrived escape is found later in the book, when the Yankee calls Clarence to request that he send Launcelot and his boys to rescue King Arthur from execution. After Hank is himself caught by authorities and the execution is scheduled a day earlier, Hank fears that Launcelot's men on horseback will not arrive in time. But the men do make it—just as the king is about to be hanged—because they rode newly invented bicycles instead of horses. These two escapes are unlikely, uncreative, and anticlimactic, and they represent one of the poorer aspects of Twain's work.

Despite its occasional resort to *deus ex machina*, *A Connecticut Yankee* includes some good adventure and excitement, and in this respect it may be considered similar to Twain's earlier novel, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Huck's journeys with Jim, the king, and the duke—like Hank's travels with Sandy and Arthur—take the story's characters to new situations and predicaments. The characters in *Huck Finn*, as those in *A Connecticut Yankee*, at times rely on unrealistic escapes from tough situations (such as when Huck just happens to arrive at Aunt Sally's house at the end of his journey and Jim

just happens to be hidden in Aunt Sally's shed). In addition, the quick lies that Hank must occasionally devise to explain why he does not always use his claimed magical powers are redolent of the stories that Huck repeatedly contrives to cover up his accompaniment of an escaped slave. And both of Twain's books satirize superstition and established religion while condemning slavery and cruelty.

Perhaps the most apparent similarity between the two books is the way in which the main characters add "style" to their schemes. The Connecticut Yankee orchestrates an elaborate display of his "magical powers" by planting in Merlin's tower blasting powder that is set off by a lightning storm. And although Hank uses only simple plumbing to restore the holy fountain, he puts on a spectacular display of its renewed operation for the crowds, complete with fire, rockets, and mystical words. Similarly, when Huck ran away from his father's cabin, he did not just steal a canoe and float down the river; he also killed a hog and spread a trail of flour to create the appearance that the cabin had been robbed and Huck had been murdered. In freeing Jim from his shed, Tom Sawyer and Huck do not simply steal the key and unlock the door; instead, they dig a tunnel, bake a rope into a pie, design a coat of arms for Jim to inscribe, fill the shed with snakes and spiders, and pretend to capture Jim as part of an Indian raid. Hank thus spoke for Tom Sawyer as well as himself when he said that "I never care to do a thing in a quiet way; it's got to be theatrical or I don't take any interest in it" (Twain 247).

A Connecticut Yankee and *Huck Finn* are very similar in content, tone, and purpose, but in a few respects, *A Connecticut Yankee* is the stronger novel. Though Huck and Jim generally mature as their voyage progresses, neither displays the complexity of character that Hank does, nor do they as closely resemble Twain's own personality.

While *Huck Finn* and *A Connecticut Yankee* both condemn irrational religion, slavery, and cruelty, the latter work does so far more extensively and powerfully. For example, *Huck Finn*'s criticism of slaveholding is largely limited to its description of Jim's escape and the breakup of the Wilks family's slaves. *A Connecticut Yankee*, in contrast, paints a horrific picture of a slave chain: "They had slept in these chains every night, bundled together like swine.[...] Their irons had chafed the skin from their ankles and made sores which were ulcerated and wormy. Their naked feet were torn, and none walked without a limp" (Twain 153). The book goes on to describe one young woman who, upon stumbling "giddy with fatigue," was thrown on the ground to "expose her body" while the slave master "laid on with his lash like a madman till her back was flayed, she shrieking and struggling[...]" (Twain 154). *A Connecticut Yankee* is thus far more moving in its portraits of injustice, as well as being more complex and thought-provoking. And because it still captures equally well the humor, adventure, and style of Twain's other work, *A Connecticut Yankee* should replace *Huck Finn* in the AP-English course.

A Connecticut Yankee does contain some weak points, including contrived escapes and instances of humor inappropriate to the message of the work. But it is overall a strong novel, particularly in the complexity of its protagonist, the effectiveness of its satire, and the provocativeness of its ethical situations, some of which are applicable to the present day. *A Connecticut Yankee* displays great similarity to *Huck Finn* in that both books combine adventure with social commentary and feature resourceful characters who cannot resist flashy presentation. Yet the greater depth and

impact of *A Connecticut Yankee* make it in general a more powerful book, one that should take the place of *Huck Finn* for AP English.

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