

The unities in "connecticut yankee"



There is no doubt that Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* is marred by structural absurdities, flawed changes in tone, and a stuttering, episodic arrangement. The novel often attempts to do far too many things at once, juggling commentaries on chivalry, aristocracy, religion, technology, and more. That the book survives these shortcomings and goes on to transcend many of Twain's other texts speaks to the author's remarkable talent. The book succeeds largely due to a trio of elements that work below the surface narrative; these three devices are arguably the most valued tools in Twain's repertoire. The first of these, irony, is obvious from even a light reading. Never mind that *Yankee* was originally intended to be a romantic tale. Since readers are likely to sympathize with Hank Morgan, they instinctively reflect his presupposition that the 19th (or 21st) century is superior to the simple-minded, archaic designs of the 6th century, most likely because the differences between the two ages are immediate and tangible. Whereas the modern world has brought us a degree of gender and racial equality, charity, leisure, and democracy, the world that King Arthur inhabited was sordid, muddy, and a mockery of its own virtues. In the modern era, a man is allowed to be a man, and even those who must resort to menial physical labor are granted the chance to at least care for their own families without fear of a "greater" knocking down their doors. At least, such is the reality presented to us through Hank Morgan's reflections, but as any person who has read a quantity of literature from that era knows, such decency was not often the case. In Chapter XXXIII, "Sixth-Century Political Economy," Morgan attempts to detail the sly workings of the political economy to the blacksmith Dowley, but all of his arguments are ignorantly rebuked. What Morgan never stops to consider is that the situation he is

dissecting was not unfamiliar to the 19th-century population; in fact, it was well-nigh analogous to the deplorable standards of life experienced by many of Morgan's contemporaries. This leads to the second facet of Twain's style that keeps this far-reaching book from toppling over the edge: tragedy. The work appears to blindly assume that a richer economy strengthens a culture. Indeed, at face value this seems to be true; after all, how could a civilization that is educated, prosperous, and constantly evolving possibly amount to less than a civilization that puts itself at the mercy of inbred dolts adorned in cumbersome armor and ridiculous garments? This too, however, unravels in the end, when we see that Morgan's "colony" of educated, like-minded revolutionaries default back to their superstitious ways at the drop of a hat. There are some instinctive human failings that cannot in a million years be eliminated, and thus there is little to no basis for assuming that all the technology in the world could make a culture truly "better." As Twain commented regularly during the final years of his life, the human race is inherently sick and depraved, and regardless of the superficial masks that humans may wear, their souls remain destitute. Despite Morgan's proud assumptions, humanity has not evolved much over the last 13 centuries, and the future doesn't seem to look any better. In keeping with Twain's Calvinist attitudes, there is nothing that man can do to save himself, nothing that can be done to redeem him. Finally, we arrive at what is often described as the most distracting and irrelevant aspect of Twain's writing: its humor. Often criticized as needlessly creating ambiguity in a situation or diminishing the story's impact, many consider Twain's focus on humor the failing of a man incapable of seriously addressing an important subject. To some extent, the critics are right: the humor does disrupt the mood and harmony, but perhaps

the critics aren't giving Twain enough credit. The most essential atom of a joke is its unexpectedness. A joke must, at its core, work to conceal the way things really are. This ambiguity is continually present in Morgan's narrative, with his dubious presentation of things which may or may not be accurate. Then, at the end, we find that everything we have come to believe is not quite the truth. Merlin really is magical; technology alone cannot create a utopia; mankind cannot be salvaged; Morgan is not the hero of the story, but rather the villain. A joke doesn't have to be funny to be a joke, but humor certainly helps, for when one is at last shown the horrible and sad truth of mankind's doomed nature, what can one possibly do but laugh?