It would be an oversimplification to imply that the Paige fiasco fundamentally changed Twain’s world view. His sense of the dark elements within human nature was always there, as Fred Kaplan points out, “from as early as his depiction of pietistic hypocrisy in Innocents Abroad, of avarice in Roughing It, of the dehumanizing world of slavery in Huckleberry Finn, of the realities of slave-society ideology in Pudd’nhead Wilson.” And it was there, germinating, even in the beginning of Connecticut Yankee. That Twain chose to name his hero the “Boss” and to label the institutions the Boss created in Camelot “civilization factories” and “man factories” suggests some fairly strong ambivalence about the future of machine culture.

By the end of the book, that ambivalence had turned conclusively; Twain’s mechanical milk was now unmistakably sour. It is no longer the 19th century rescuing the sixth. It has become what Fred Kaplan calls “the interactive folly of feudal past and nineteenth-century present.” The concluding battle scene, in which the Yankee and his 53 followers slaughter 25,000 knights by electrocuting them in their armor as they attempt to cross a demilitarized zone that evokes World War I, remains appallingly powerful. What follows is downright eerie, given that it was written more than 50 years before the beginning of the atomic age. The Yankee and his followers are triumphant—“We fifty-four were masters of England”—but they are unable to escape beyond the wall of dead knights and must retreat to their cave to avoid the stench (not radioactive but equally lethal). We leave the Yankee and his troops wasting away toward death, waiting, as it were, for the canned goods to run out in the fallout shelter.

It’s a shame that Twain’s typesetting machine didn’t work out, but there can be no doubt that Connecticut Yankee is a better book as it stands than it would have been if it had never gone beyond a simple satire of chivalry (knights trying to scratch aren’t all that funny). If Twain were around today, perhaps he would take solace in the fact that typesetting machines of all kinds were made dinosaurs by the desktop publishing revolution. Ambivalence with technology, on the hand, is very much with us today. Perhaps Twain was a better inventor than he gave himself credit for.

Discussion questions

1. In the more than 100 years since Twain wrote A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court, the popularity of Arthurian legend and literature has grown steadily, with countless books and movies, for adults and children, offering variations on the familiar themes. What would Twain have made of the continuing popularity of Camelot? Would he be disappointed that his Connecticut Yankee couldn’t dynamite chivalry out of existence after all?

2. Twain is well known for his phrase the “damned human race,” and certainly his sense of doom is apparent in Connecticut Yankee. Yet he was forever involved in social issues and humanitarian causes, trying one way or another to make things better. How do these two sides of his personality manifest themselves in Connecticut Yankee?

3. Cervantes is another author who started out to write a satire of chivalry and wound up writing a very different kind of book. Whereas Twain became disenchanted with Hank Morgan as the novel progressed, Cervantes found himself more sympathetic to Don Quixote. Which figure—Quixote, the dangerous idealist with little grip on reality—or Hank Morgan—the can-do capitalist with an unswerving belief in technology—has been the bigger threat to civilization, and which stands to threaten it more in the future?

Further reading

Justin Kaplan. Mr. Clemens and Mr. Twain. Simon & Schuster, 1966.
“Mark Twain is the Lincoln of our literature.” So said no less a 19th-century literary figure than William Dean Howells. Fred Kaplan, the latest in a line of Twain biographers, goes further: “He is a cultural signifier. The European and American nineteenth century has a short but impressive list of such figures, among them Napoleon, Lincoln, Dickens, Marx, and Freud. But only one nineteenth-century American writer has that sort of name recognition. Like those of the other historical figures on any such short list, his name instantly evokes and is inseparable from issues so important that they have helped shape our view of ourselves and of our national self-definition.”

Most of those issues are associated, of course, with Huckleberry Finn, still considered by many to be the one 19th-century literary figure than William Dean Howells. Fred Kaplan puts it, “into a national myth, the epitome of small-town, pre-industrial America.” So what is Twain doing in a discussion series devoted to the literature of New England?

When he was 17, in 1853, Samuel Clemens left Hannibal to join his mother in St. Louis, where she had moved to join her new husband (James Clemens died in 1847). After a brief period in St. Louis, Clemens (having now adopted the pseudonym Mark Twain) embarked for New York, and from that point on, he lived in various places around the country and in Europe. From the early 1870s to his death in 1910, however, his official residence was Hartford, Connecticut. Twain, therefore, lived more than twice as long in New England as he did in Hannibal.

Twain’s geographical bona fides as a New England author might appear more solid than his literary ones. A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court (1892), Twain’s last major work and his self-proclaimed swan song, boasts a New England hero, to be sure, but it takes place, as the title declares, in Arthurian England. The novel’s connection to New England rests not with Connecticut as a setting but with the mentality of its hero. Twain’s Connecticut Yankee embodies the can-do spirit of 19th-century American capitalism, and his belief in the wonders of modern technology reflects his experience in the factories of Hartford, a center of New England industry. If the Hannibal of Huck and Tom was Twain’s symbol of pre-industrial America, then Hartford and its Yankee became the key to his vision of the country’s post-industrial civilization.

That vision is at the heart of Connecticut Yankee, and it is what gives the book its enduring interest. It is true that by the time modern readers finish the novel, we are struck by its remarkable prescience, its anticipation of a world where technology has run amok and where weapons of mass destruction have brought about Armageddon. But that isn’t the novel Twain set out to write. His view of civilization, of capitalism, of industry, even of the American spirit, was transformed while he was creating Connecticut Yankee. The Hank Morgan that ends the book is a very different man than the one who woke up one day in sixth-century England and saw a big job on his hands if he was going to bring light to the Dark Ages.

The novel begins as a kind of comic populist fable. It is no surprise that Franklin D. Roosevelt found the term “New Deal” in the pages of Connecticut Yankee. In the opening chapters, as the Yankee is consolidating his power in Camelot and looking for ways to begin his reforms, he says: “I was become a stockholder in a corporation where nine hundred and ninety-four of the members furnished all the money and did all the work, and the other six elected themselves a permanent board of direction and took all the dividends. It seemed to me that what the nine hundred and ninety-four dupes needed was a new deal.”

To 21st-century ears, that sounds almost like boilerplate populist rhetoric (the same theme was expounded in numerous variations at the 2004 Democratic National Convention, which nominated a Massachusetts Yankee for president). In the late 19th century, however, when Hank Morgan uttered the words, the rhetoric was fresh. Twain believed fervently in the promise of democracy, and he saw technology as a way to distance the country from the agrarian feudalism of the South, the Walter Scott–like remnants of chivalry that allowed slavery to flourish. At one level, Twain began Connecticut Yankee with the idea of fighting the Civil War all over again: Camelot would stand in for the South—a society based on the elitist principles of chivalry—and Hank Morgan would bring a northern new deal based on democracy and enlightened industry.

So what happened? Twain sets out to slay the dragon of slavery—this time with comedy and satire (knights unable to scratch within their armor)—and winds up launching a volley of WMDs against the defenseless sixth century. In the modern world, we might accuse Twain of running out of his anti-depression medication before he finished the book, and in a sense, that’s exactly what happened. Twain’s dark side—the pessimistic, Mencken-like satirist rather than the Whitmanesque bard singing the praises of democracy—lassoed the author in the midst of Connecticut Yankee and didn’t let go.

But there was help from the outside world. Among Twain’s many passions, he fashioned himself an inventor, and he was determined to become a rich man. At the time he was writing Connecticut Yankee, he thought he would find the way to indulge both these passions. Twain invested most of his available cash in the development of something called the Paige typesetting machine, invented by Samuel Paige, and in Twain’s words “a mechanical marvel that made all the other wonderful inventions of the human brain sink pretty nearly into the commonplace, mere toys, simplicities.” Twain’s typesetting machine was the perfect mechanical metaphor for all his dreams. It would bring literature to the masses more effectively than ever before; it would employ the ingenuity of man in a forward-thinking venture that would take us further and further from tyranny and slavery; and, best of all, it would make him rich.

It didn’t work out that way. Unfortunately, the Paige typesetter turned out to be the Betamax of its time (a rival machine, Mergenthaler’s Linotype, was the VHS). Not only that, but on the way to financial ruin, Twain confronted head-on the true horror of the mechanized, industrialized future: the bureaucracy-spewing corporate animal itself. His attempts to manufacture and distribute the Paige machine were derailed by a delicate product with 18,000 separate parts (each of which had a habit of breaking), and his own confidence in the Great Century was further eroded by his immersion in the soul-sucking world of fundraising and deal making. It is no surprise that when Twain returned to his writing desk, desperate now to finish Connecticut Yankee and then begin to refit his depleted bank accounts, he would see Hank Morgan, “Boss” of the corporate Camelot, in a very different light.