

Twain's A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court and U.S. Imperialism

Jennifer A. O'Neill
Iowa State University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb>



Part of the [Comparative Literature Commons](#), and the [Critical and Cultural Studies Commons](#)

Dedicated to the dissemination of scholarly and professional information, [Purdue University Press](#) selects, develops, and distributes quality resources in several key subject areas for which its parent university is famous, including business, technology, health, veterinary medicine, and other selected disciplines in the humanities and sciences.

CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture, the peer-reviewed, full-text, and open-access learned journal in the humanities and social sciences, publishes new scholarship following tenets of the discipline of comparative literature and the field of cultural studies designated as "comparative cultural studies." Publications in the journal are indexed in the Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature (Chadwyck-Healey), the Arts and Humanities Citation Index (Thomson Reuters ISI), the Humanities Index (Wilson), Humanities International Complete (EBSCO), the International Bibliography of the Modern Language Association of America, and Scopus (Elsevier). The journal is affiliated with the Purdue University Press monograph series of Books in Comparative Cultural Studies. Contact: [<clcweb@purdue.edu>](mailto:clcweb@purdue.edu)

Recommended Citation

O'Neill, Jennifer A. "Twain's A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court and U.S. Imperialism." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 9.3 (2007): [<https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1224>](https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1224)

This text has been double-blind peer reviewed by 2+1 experts in the field.

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact epubs@purdue.edu for additional information.

This is an Open Access journal. This means that it uses a funding model that does not charge readers or their institutions for access. Readers may freely read, download, copy, distribute, print, search, or link to the full texts of articles. This journal is covered under the [CC BY-NC-ND license](#).

CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture, the peer-reviewed, full-text, and open-access learned journal in the humanities and social sciences, publishes new scholarship following tenets of the discipline of comparative literature and the field of cultural studies designated as "comparative cultural studies." In addition to the publication of articles, the journal publishes review articles of scholarly books and publishes research material in its *Library Series*. Publications in the journal are indexed in the Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature (Chadwyck-Healey), the Arts and Humanities Citation Index (Thomson Reuters ISI), the Humanities Index (Wilson), Humanities International Complete (EBSCO), the International Bibliography of the Modern Language Association of America, and Scopus (Elsevier). The journal is affiliated with the Purdue University Press monograph series of Books in Comparative Cultural Studies. Contact: <clcweb@purdue.edu>

Volume 9 Issue 3 (September 2007) Article 3

Jennifer A. O'Neill,

"Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* and U.S. Imperialism"

<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol9/iss3/3>>

Contents of *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 9.3 (2007)

<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol9/iss3/>>

Abstract: In her paper, "Twain's novel *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* and U.S. Imperialism," Jennifer A. O'Neill argues that while it Twain's text is commonly viewed as an attack on monarchy and the Catholic church, one of the book's primary focuses is U.S. imperialism. In the scholarship of Twain's text some have acknowledged the text as a discussion of colonialism, most tend to see it as an exaltation of "civilizing" efforts rather than the scalding indictment it was clearly intended to be. Indeed, Twain embraced U.S. colonial efforts in the Pacific early in his life but by the time he wrote his novel, he was opposed to U.S. expansionist efforts. O'Neill argues that Twain's later public speeches and letters indicate dissatisfaction with colonial efforts. In O'Neill's analysis, a careful reading of the novel and other pertinent sources show that this work has not been received in the manner Twain intended.

Jennifer A. O'NEILL

Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* and U.S. Imperialism

Mark Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* opens with a selection from Thomas Malory's *Morte D'Arthur*, "How Sir Launcelot Slew Two Giants, and Made a Castle Free." *A Connecticut Yankee* has long been defined as a commentary against the "two giants" of monarchy and the established church, as Juliette A. Trainor suggests: "Is it too much to read in the two giants, 'well armed, all save their heads, and with two horrible clubs in their hands,' the two mighty powers, the Catholic Church and monarchy, which the Boss hoped to overthrow?" (382). According to this interpretation, Launcelot represents Twain "wielding his sword" of humor and ridicule, against these powers (382). While Twain's critique of the church and monarchy throughout the novel supports Trainor's rationale for the opening selection, it can be argued that Twain's *Yankee* aims to speak out against a third power structure, imperialism, depicted by Hank Morgan's cultural and technological infiltration of sixth-century England. One might contend that imperialism is not the concern here since *A Connecticut Yankee* does not deal with the issue of national expansion but, rather, with the extension of Hank Morgan's personal power. In "The Once and Future Boss: Mark Twain's Yankee," Chadwick Hanson states, "Many critics have remarked in passing that the Yankee is, technically, a dictator" (67), and that "We should not be misled by his hatred of aristocracy. The Yankee is not troubled by authoritarian power or position as such" (68). Hanson argues that Hank Morgan's disdain for aristocratic power lies in the fact that it is inherited, not earned. Morgan sees society as, "a competitive race in which the prize is holding power over the losers -- being boss" (63). This is exemplified through an early statement made by Morgan: "I made up my mind to two things: if it was still the nineteenth century and I was among lunatics and couldn't get away, I would presently boss that asylum or know the reason why; and if on the other hand it was really the sixth century, all right, I didn't want any softer thing: I would boss the whole countryside inside of three months" (17). While it would be difficult to refute Morgan's thirst for power, I contend we ought to examine how his actions might be viewed as a representation of imperialism. Although only briefly, Morgan does discuss plans to expand his empire. After his defeat of the fifty knights in Chapter 39, Morgan reviews his progress: "We had a steamboat or two on the Thames, we had steam war-ships, and the beginning of a steam commercial marine; I was getting ready to send out an expedition to discover America" (398). Although this seems to be the only overt statement of Morgan's intent to expand, the text as a whole shows his commitment to imperialist principles. Put simply, *A Connecticut Yankee* deals with a foreign land overrun with ideals that do not originate in the actions and collective will of the native people but from an outside force, namely, a nineteenth-century US-American force that insists on the superiority of its own ways. In light of the United States' expansionist efforts in the Pacific and elsewhere during the time of *A Connecticut Yankee's* writing and given Twain's history of speaking out against expansionist policy, an anti-imperialist interpretation of *Yankee* is a logical consideration.

Before addressing specific aspects of Twain's novel, it makes sense to examine a brief timeline of the Hawaiian islands and Twain's interest and involvement there. Historians believe that the islands were settled between 100 and 600 A.D., and that the native inhabitants had no contact with Europeans until 1778 when Captain James Cook arrived on Kauai and named the Islands after the Earl of Sandwich. By 1790, the first US-American ships began docking in Hawaii on searches for northwestern otter pelts, and ten years later, US-American fur traders had control of the industry. By 1810, King Kamehameha I granted US-American merchants a monopoly on the islands' sandalwood, which, combined with the fur trading industry, amounted to nearly a million dollars annually. From 1920 to 1945, Honolulu served as a major whaling headquarters for US-American ships. As whaling operations surpassed even the value of fur and sandalwood trading, the influx of US-American tourists and settlers increased dramatically. Many of these visitors came as missionaries, following the lead of a group from

Connecticut (of all places), sent out by the U.S. Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions in 1819. Christianity spread, as did U.S. influence in general, and by the 1950s there was a strong argument for the annexation of Hawaii. Another solidifying factor in U.S. relations with Hawaii came from the islands' sugar exports. After Louisiana seceded from the Union in 1861 there was a huge shortage of the crop, and it was discovered that Hawaiian fields were far more productive than ones in Louisiana (see Whitehead 158-66). In 1866 Twain set forth for Honolulu with the intent of reporting on Hawaiian business opportunities for the Sacramento *Union*. He stayed there just over four months writing detailed accounts of local attitudes and customs, and more importantly, exploring opportunities for US-American businesses (see Whitehead 166). Twain's understanding of and opinions regarding the islands are recorded in several of his writings, including his 1872 book, *Roughing It*, an account of the American West. The last chapters of the book contain Twain's diary entries from his stay on the island. These early observations of Hawaii show a disdain for many island customs and a large measure of thanks for the civilizing work of missionaries who had traveled there to elevate the islanders out of their pagan state. In a diary entry dated the third day of his stay in Honolulu, Twain writes: "The missionaries have clothed them, educated them, broken up the tyrannous authority of their chiefs, and given them freedom and the right to enjoy whatever their hands and brains produce, with equal laws for all, and punishment for all alike who transgress them. The contrast is so strong -- the benefit conferred upon this people by the missionaries is so prominent, so palpable, and so unquestionable, that the frankest compliment I could pay them, and the best, is simply to point to the condition of the Sandwich-Islanders of Captain Cook's time, and their condition to-day. Their work speaks for itself" (Twain, *Roughing It* 187-88). It may be surmised, then, that Twain was a staunch proponent of missionary and civilizing efforts, but only if we look no further into the development of Twain's feelings on the issue.

In "Hawaiian Feudalism and Marks Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*," Fred W. Lorch compares Twain's delineation of Arthurian England to that of feudal Hawaii, which he claims was oppressed under tribal leadership that Twain represented in his novel through monarchy and the Catholic Church. Lorch's interpretation, however, is flawed owing to his own inflexible understanding of missionaries and colonizing forces as nothing but a blessing for feudal Hawaii. He assumes, citing statements made early in Twain's career that Twain continued to share his colonial views right up until the writing of *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*. Lorch writes: "Mark Twain's indictment of the social, political, and religious practices in the islands is strikingly similar to his indictment of these same practices in King Arthur's England. And no less remarkable is the similarity between the role of the American missionaries who destroyed the old order in the Sandwich Islands and the role of the Connecticut Yankee who sought to free King Arthur's serfs in much the same way" (54). Thus, Hank Morgan is a redemptive figure for Lorch, rather than the oppressor that Twain's text clearly reveals him to be. Granted, at a certain point, Twain did classify himself as "a red-hot imperialist" (Gibson 445), and after his initial visit to the Hawaiian Islands in 1866 he delivered several speeches that "urged the United States to annex the Sandwich Islands and let the 'go-ahead Americans' step in and take possession of their rich sugar, cotton, and rice fields" (Foner 310-11). What Lorch neglects, however, is that although Twain had been an ardent advocate for expansion as a young man, his views had changed drastically by the time he wrote *A Connecticut Yankee*. In fact, after less than a year of contemplating his time on the islands, Twain's views were already beginning to shift. Philip S. Foner explains, "Twain was to repeat the Sandwich Island lecture for several years, but he soon omitted the annexation passages. Within a year following his return from the islands, he was publicly ranked with the anti-expansionists" (311). He continues, "Any doubt of the sincerity of Twain's abandonment of his earlier pro-annexation views was set to rest by the stand he took in 1873 on the question of annexing the Sandwich Islands" (312). This stand became necessary after the death of Kahehameha V, when the U.S. began to clamor more loudly for the annexation of Hawaii. Two letters Twain submitted to the *New York Tribune* reinforced his views. Foner cites the first one: "The natives of the island number

only 50,000, and the whites about 3,000, chiefly Americans. According to Capt. Cook, the natives numbered 400,000 less than a hundred years ago. But the traders brought labor and fancy disease -- in other words long, deliberate, infallible destruction, and the missionaries brought the means of grace and got them ready. So the two forces are working along harmoniously, and anybody who knows about figures can tell you exactly when the last Kanaka will be in Abraham's bosom and the islands in the hands of the whites" (Twain qtd. Foner 312).

In classic Twain form, his second letter presents a scathing satire denouncing expansion as a whole. The letter states, "We must annex these people. We can afflict them with our wise and beneficent government. We can introduce the novelty of thieves, all the way up from street-car pickpockets to municipal robbers and government defaulters" (Twain qtd. 313), and goes on to suggest the U.S. can also convince the Hawaiian people to "do away with their old-time notion that stealing is not respectable" (Twain qtd. 313). Twain's view of colonizing and "civilizing" efforts, then, is very clear. While this knowledge renders Lorch's interpretation of a redemptive Hank Morgan irresponsible if not absurd, it does raise some interesting questions regarding *A Connecticut Yankee's* inception and basic symbolism. Lorch, along with Stephen H. Sumida, views *A Connecticut Yankee* as having sprung from an earlier Twain work that was left unfinished and unpublished. This novel, both argue, was built with the same framework as *A Connecticut Yankee*, but dealing more explicitly with the effects of the colonizer on the colonized and the notion that unwilling change cannot be forced upon a person or group of people. Sumida, in his paper "Reevaluating Mark Twain's Novel of Hawaii," refers to Twain's 7 January 1884 correspondence with William Dean Howells explaining the thematic concepts of the book. The letter describes the main character, twelve-year-old Bill Ragsdale, who, after being brought up within the pagan customs of the Sandwich Islands, winds up converting to Christianity based on the teaching of U.S. missionaries. Some fifteen years later Ragsdale dies of leprosy, a disease brought to Hawaii by the same civilizing forces. The "hidden motive," according to Twain, is "that the religious folly you are born in you will *die* in, no matter what apparently reasonable religious folly may seemed to have taken its place meanwhile and abolished and obliterated it" (qtd. in Sumida 590). This makes Twain's opinion regarding missionary efforts very clear: they are ineffective. Ragsdale's death as a result of a disease brought over by US-American expansionists carries the anti-missionary sentiment a step farther. Twain seems to be stating that, not only are these efforts futile; they are actually quite destructive in nature. Naturally, some scholarly debate exists over the reason Twain did not publish this work. Sumida submits that Twain may have feared that it would be misread, namely that since Ragsdale died of leprosy after his abandonment of professed Christianity, the novel would actually be seen as "promissionary propaganda" (605), which certainly would have contradicted Twain's public statements regarding the issue. Another suggestion is that, after reading Malory's *Morte D'Arthur*, Twain recognized a more imaginative vehicle in which to convey his message (see Lorch 55). Either way, Twain's effort shows a marked interest in exploring the topic of colonialism in his fictional works along with his other written and spoken endeavors.

Having thus established a timeline of Twain's beliefs regarding expansion, and his desire to speak out regarding those beliefs, let us examine the text of *A Connecticut Yankee* itself. Twain tells us the stranger he encounters in Warwick Castle, the Connecticut Yankee, asks him a rather strange question: "'You know about the transmigration of souls; do you know about the transposition of epochs -- and bodies?'" (2). The transmigration of which Morgan speaks entails more: it involves the transposition of the entire U.S. system -- economics, technology, politics, and everything in between -- to a less powerful, less developed society. This extension of power and imposition of ideals on a society less advanced -- once Twain's narrative inventions of time travel and enchantment are stripped away -- is, clearly, pure imperialism. Speaking of the primitive state of the sixth-century English people, Morgan states: "I saw that I was just another Robinson Crusoe, cast away on an uninhabited island, with no society but some more or less tame animals" (54). The peasants are again compared to animals a few chapters later: "They were the quaintest and simplest and trustiest race; why they were

nothing but rabbits" (63). Morgan sees himself as, "a giant among pygmies, a man among children, a master intelligence among intellectual moles" (67), and, of course, views the peasants' primitive state as a condition that can be remedied through implementation of the technology and ideals of US-American society. One of the first issues he addresses is that of technology. Morgan chides the English for their lack of simple household comforts. He complains, "There was no gas, there were no candles...there were no books, pens, paper, or ink ... But perhaps worst of all was that there was no sugar, coffee, tea, or tobacco" (54). Of course, it is not long before he introduces factories for the production of all sorts of goods (81), a system of telephones, the telegraph, and of roads (84), and even a patent office to protect his inventions (74). The technological advancements do not stop here; the most important developments come in the form of weaponry and defense. One of the first demonstrations of the Yankee's power is when he blows up Merlin's tower, a clear foreshadowing of the destruction of which his ideas are capable. More importantly, the Yankee establishes a naval academy and a military academy -- called West Point -- where his followers can learn all the latest methods in US-American warfare. Later in the novel Morgan delights in the learning of one of his students. He explains: "It was beautiful to hear the lad lay out the science of war, and wallow in the details of battle and siege, of supply, transportation, mining and countermining, grand tactics, big strategy and little strategy, signal service, infantry, cavalry, artillery, and all about the siege guns, field guns, gatling guns, rifled guns, smooth bores, musket practice, revolver practice" (243). It does not seem difficult to discern where the Yankee's interests lie. Not only does Morgan seek to Americanize Arthurian England in terms of technology, but in social matters as well. A US-American-modeled newspaper and school system are high on his list of priorities (74), as is the English peoples' abandonment of traditional monarchy in favor of democratic political ideals set forth in the U.S. constitution (113). Of even greater concern, however, is his plan to reform the nation's church structure. Morgan introduces the US-American concept of freedom of religion, insisting, "Everybody could be any kind of a Christian he wanted to; there was perfect freedom in that matter" (81). He continues by presenting his national ideal of separation of church and state: "But I confined public religious teaching to the churches and Sunday schools, permitting nothing of it in my other educational buildings" (81). While many of these may be good ideas, the problem lies in the fact that they were alien to Arthurian people themselves, and were, therefore, not realistic.

Whether they are feasible on a long-term scale, the Yankee recognizes that in order for any of these developments to take off, the English need freedom from the oppression of the Roman Catholic Church. Although he wishes to overthrow the church, he knows he has to be careful—earlier on he remarks, "It would be poor wisdom to antagonize the church" (84). Once his authority is more concrete, however, he decides to undermine the church through the dissemination of soap, with the idea that this will uplift and civilize the English people. The soap is to be distributed by knights wearing sandwich boards, who Morgan calls missionaries. In added evangelical fervor, he advertises this soap on bulletin boards reading "Patronized by the Elect" (142). What is especially interesting concerning Morgan's feelings toward the Catholic Church is that, without admitting it, he embraces a corrupt unity with the institution. He seeks usurpation of the establishment only insofar as that act solidifies his own power. Dan Beard's illustration on page 215 represents Morgan's stance regarding the Catholic Church. This depiction shows a ghoulish figure wearing a popish hat labeled "church" and "state." The specter wields a stake called "policy" and wears a shredded garment that enfolds a human captor underneath. On sections of the garment are the words "slavery," "superstition" and "ignorance" (215). However, Morgan's expressed position changes during his episode with the Holy Fountain. The head priest demands the Yankee to restore the fountain using, "enchantments that be holy, for the church will not endure that work in her cause be done by devil's magic" (205), but when Morgan realizes he can increase his power by pretending to align himself with the church, he jumps at the opportunity. He says: "Before noon mass was over, we were at the well again; for there was a deal to do, yet, and I was determined to spring the miracle before midnight, for business reasons: for whereas a miracle

worked for the Church on a week-day is worth a good deal, it is worth six times as much if you get it in on a Sunday" (219). After the miracle is performed, Morgan expresses no regret over his act of pushing the English people further into superstition and ignorance. Rather, he remarks, "It was a great night, an immense night. I could hardly get to sleep for glorifying over it" (224). This does not seem as much a denunciation of the Church as a comment on Morgan's crafty nature and willingness to use any means necessary to advance his own power, and, in turn, his social systems and ideas of progress among the English people.

In the conclusion of the novel, the Battle of the Sand-Belt reinforces the argument that Twain sought to critique more than just the Church and monarchy. The final chapters speak of a power just as hideous, and equally capable of bringing darkness upon humanity. The Battle of the Sand-Belt, through Morgan's use of his highly touted technological developments, destroys most of the English population, all because of their daring resistance to his incessant demands for progress. Based on the amount of foreshadowing throughout the text, it should come as no surprise that Morgan's adventure culminates in violence and destruction. We can see several instances where Twain attempts to forewarn his readers -- to let them know Morgan's pressures will not lead to a favorable ending. Allan Guttman points out several examples, such as when The Boss "frees" the enchanted maidens from their captivity in a vile pigsty. Morgan reflects: "If these ladies were hogs to everybody and to themselves, it would be necessary to break the enchantment. And hazardous, too; for in attempting disenchantment without the true key, you are liable to err, and turn your hogs into dogs, and dogs into cats, and cats into rats, and so-on, and end by reducing your materials to nothing, finally, or to and odorless gas which you can't follow -- which of course amounts to the same thing" (*A Connecticut Yankee* 184). The process of enlightenment, even Morgan realizes, must be done with "the true key," time and common sentiment, or else it will result in terrible chaos. Similarly, after Morgan surveys the beginnings of his civilization he compares it to "any serene volcano, standing innocent with its smokeless summit in the blue sky and giving no sign of the rising hell in its bowels" (82). These and other references to volcanoes throughout the novel seem to foreshadow the story's inevitably violent end (Guttman 105-06) while linking simultaneously Twain's storyline to an island setting. While some may insist the closing chapters merely present a critique of technology -- for indeed, Twain did have many concerns dealing with the new industrial age -- we have to consider other implications. Since some of Twain's most heartfelt endeavors involved the advancement of technology, it would not make sense for him to level such a stark criticism against industrialization in and of itself. His concern seems to lie in the forceful implementation of technology, capitalism, and other US-American ideals on a people who had not come to value them on their own terms. If we do not take this suggestion into account, we are likely to view the entire novel as a chaotic mishmash. In conclusion, Gladys Bellamy presents a strong warning against just such an overly simplistic reading of Twain's novel: "Instead of the popular interpretation as solely a celebration of American progress, the book may conceivably be viewed as a fictional working-out of the idea that a too-quick civilization breeds disaster. In brief, civilization must be organic" (qtd. in Guttman 103).

Works Cited

- Foner, Philip S. *Mark Twain: Social Critic*. New York: International Publishers, 1958.
- Gibson, William M. "Mark Twain and Howells: Anti-Imperialists." *The New England Quarterly* 20.4 (1947): 435-70.
- Guttmann, Allen. "Mark Twain's Connecticut Yankee: Affirmation of the Vernacular Tradition." *Critics on Mark Twain*. Ed. David B. Kesterton. Coral Gables: U of Miami P, 1973. 103-07.
- Hanson, Chadwick. "The Once and Future Boss." *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 28.1 (1973): 62-73.
- Lorch, Fred W. "Hawaiian Feudalism and Mark Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*." *American Literature* 30.1 (1958): 50-66.
- Sumida, Stephen H. "Reevaluating Mark Twain's Novel of Hawaii." *American Literature* 61.4 (1989): 586-609.
- Trainor, Juliette A. "Symbolism in *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*." *Modern Language Notes* 66.6 (1951): 382-85.
- Twain, Mark. *Roughing It*. New York: Harper Brothers, 1899.

Twain, Mark. *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1983.

Whitehead, John. "Hawaii: The First and Last Far West?" *The Western Historical Quarterly* 23.2 (1992): 153-77.

Author's profile: Jennifer A. O'Neill is a member of Iowa State University's Creative Writing and Environment program. As such, her primary interests lie in "place" and how it influences and is affected by social forces. In her fiction, as well as her critical writing, O'Neill focuses on the treatment of the natural world or groups within their natural habitat. At present, O'Neill works on aspects of Iowa agriculture and the effects current policies have on the health of individuals, rural communities, and local ecology. O'Neill received the Iowa State University Research Excellence Award and the Hogrefe Grant-in-Aid for Creative Writing. Work from this collection is scheduled to appear in *Flyway Magazine*. E-mail: <joneill@iastate.edu>