“REPRESENTATION OF TRUTH”: DUALITY WITHIN MARK TWAIN’S A CONNECTICUT YANKEE IN KING ARTHUR’S COURT

Patricia Cady

First presented at the 2008 National Undergraduate Literature Conference at Weber State University, this paper examines contrast, as well as a changing hierarchy, within Mark Twain’s A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court. Patricia Cady asserts that, while Twain aided in moving American literature from its previous romanticist age to a realist age, he did not write exclusively as a realist, but incorporated romanticism as well, thus creating a dichotomy within the story.

Black or white. True or false. Romanticism or Realism. In a world teeming with absolutes, who are we to say something is only one way or another? The sky is not always blue; it can be grey before a storm, orange and yellow with the sunrise, or purple and red at sunset. First published in 1865, Mark Twain’s stories are considered a reaction and opposition to the Romanticist Era (1800-1850) directly preceding his writings (“romanticism”). Twain’s works are considered realist as they represent truth by telling things like they are, logically and with no embellishments, in contrast to romanticism, whose version of truth requires sentimentality while looking through rose-colored glasses to see a kinder and gentler world. Bruce Michelson states that within Twain’s canon of writing, “one can find several all-out-uprisings against the romantic mode, campaigns to drive its bad habits clean out of the American [...] and supplant them with plain-language representations of experience as ordinary people know it” (609). But is that absolutely true? Does Twain forsake all romanticism and write as a pure realist with no romanticist leanings? I don’t believe so. While I agree with Martha Banta who discusses “Twain’s own notorious double nature” (489) within his personal life, I don’t believe Twain’s duality is limited to his day-to-day activities, but translates itself onto the pages of A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court. While Twain is often spoken of as a writer following the realist tenets, I propose that because of Twain’s role as one of a few writers who transitioned American literature from romanticism to realism, that within A Connecticut Yankee he did not write solely as a realist, but incorporates romanticism as well, thereby creating a duality within the text.

While Twain’s works are often analyzed by new historicists and feminists, I intend to engage A Connecticut Yankee as a deconstructionist critique.
years in the past, in the age of Camelot and King Arthur. The book takes the reader on a journey from Hank's initial culture shock to subsequent utilization of his future knowledge, to become second in power only to King Arthur. While Hank is the protagonist, his primary antagonist throughout the book is Merlin, the sorcerer and romantic figure from literary works such as Geoffrey of Monmouth's Historia regum Britanniae and Wace's Roman de Brut. While Twain's works are often analyzed by new historicists and feminists, I intend to offer a deconstructionalist critique of A Connecticut Yankee. As Barbara Johnson states, "Deconstruction is not synonymous with destruction….The de-construction of a text does not proceed by random doubt or arbitrary subversion, but by the careful teasing out of warring forces of signification within the text itself" (qtd in Abrams 60). It is "the careful teasing out of warring forces" that utilizes the concept of binary oppositions as pioneered by Jacques Derrida. Sound/silence, day/night, as well as life/death are some examples of simple binary oppositions; however, when applied to literature, binary opposition does not restrict itself by looking only at opposites, but examines hidden hierarchy within the oppositions as well as possible inversions within that same hierarchy. By employing binary opposition to A Connecticut Yankee, I intend to investigate the characters of Merlin and Hank as symbols of romanticism and realism, the subsequent hierarchal tendencies between them, as well as explore inversions of this hierarchy within the novel.

Upon examination of the characters Merlin and Hank, it becomes apparent that Twain uses Merlin as a symbol for romanticism and Hank symbolizes realism. Upon examination of the characters Merlin and Hank, it becomes apparent that Twain uses Merlin as a symbol for romanticism and Hank symbolizes realism. By utilizing Merlin within the text, Twain automatically imbibes the novel with a romantic element. Within Historia regum Britanniae "Merlin functions as prophet, sage, and wizard to three kings" (Rider 2), Tennyson's Idylls of the King glorifies Merlin and his magical powers, and in Roman de Brut, when Merlin's mother explains his birth, Wace has her say:

When I was somewhat grown, something, I do not know if it was some ghostly illusion, often came and kissed me closely. Like a man I heard it speak, and it felt like a man to me, and several times it spoke with me, but it didn't show itself at all. It came near to me this way often and often came to kiss me, and it lay down with me and so I conceived; I have never known another man. I bore this boy (qtd in Rider 4).

Thus Merlin's birth appears to be one of only two immaculate conceptions noted in the history of the world, the other belonging to Jesus Christ. This romantic view of conception revolts against realism's attempt at rational thought. Within A Connecticut Yankee, Merlin is described as a person whom "men fear...for that he hath the storms and lightnings and all the devils that be in hell at his beck and call" (39), hence Merlin symbolizes romanticism as he stands out from the multitude of Camelot citizens due to his "magical" powers and skills. However, Merlin is a hack magician who believes in his own sleight-of-hand and performs "real" magic when no one is around, never seeming to exhibit these same professed magical feats in front of a crowd.

At an 1888 reading given in Baltimore, Twain reinforces his personal distain for romantics by asking "his audience to compare the 'mighty miracles' of science in the 19th century with the 'trivial miracles' and 'humbug magicians' of the Middle ages, to 'conceive of the blank and sterile ignorance of that day and contrast it with the vast and many-sided knowledge of this’" (qtd. in Williams 102). Nearly all that Twain dislikes with romance is epitomized in Merlin. "Merlin, whom Tennyson has recently promoted to Grand Master of romantic daydreams, is portrayed as a third-rate vaudevillian [...] His tales promote superstition and confusion in his own world; they frighten children and gullible adults; they frustrate the search for truth, [and] foster injustice” (Michelson 615, 618). Twain clearly states his abhorrence for Merlin when Hank asks, “Who is that?” and Clarence, Hank's first friend in Camelot, replies, “Merlin, the mighty liar and magician, perdition singe him for the weariness he worketh” (39). And just like that, the first volley in the battle between a realist view and sentimentality is fired.

In stark contrast to Merlin's romantic description, the forerunner of realism, Hank Morgan, introduces himself as "a Yankee of the Yankees—and practical; yes, and nearly barren of sentiment, I suppose—or poetry, in other words" (19). This initial description sets the stage for Hank epitomizing realism by stating his lack
of individuality and being any one of a number of “Yankees.” Twain further promotes this lack of individuality as the reader doesn’t even learn Hank’s name until Chapter 39 of the book. Prior to that revelation, Hank is referred to with titles such as a “Yankee” or the “Boss.” In contrast to proceeding romantic literature, Twain writes Hank as a character who “Look[s] at the opportunities for a man of knowledge, pluck, and enterprise to sail” (95–96). Hank does not rely on wishing problems away, but faces them head on and looks for every chance to improve his situation.

Throughout the book we gain a sense of Hank’s character: practical, business-minded, hard working, determined, resourceful, intelligent, and having a firm idea of right and wrong. Not surprising then, that when Hank awakens in Camelot, we see his disgust toward the idea of an inherited rank and strict social stratification as well as detesting the citizens of Camelot’s narrow-minded adherence to superstition. It is because of this distaste that “with his common sense, inventiveness, and practical knowledge, [Twain] sets out to enlighten the kingdom, with its superstitiousness and ignorance, most fully embodied in Merlin” (Hill 85). By using a realist as his main character, Twain shows his proclivity toward realism and opposition to romanticism.

In viewing these two literary figures in regards to binary oppositions, what is the hierarchy? Which character is more important? When looking at the title of the book, as well as the fact that a majority of the narration for the book is from Hank’s point of view, I think it is safe to say that Twain views Hank/realism as more important than Merlin/romanticism. While Merlin is the more powerful figure of the two upon Hank’s initial introduction to Camelot, soon Hank’s only superior is King Arthur and Merlin is forced to work in order to survive. With two such polarizing characters it comes as no surprise that they quickly become adversaries. Clear-headed intellect and thinking overcome mysticism when Hank uses his knowledge of historical events, specifically a solar eclipse, to unseat Merlin as the greatest magician and becomes “the Boss.” Recognizing “Merlin as an enemy of truth, peace, and progress” (Michelson 619), Hank uses his new position within Camelot and blows up Merlin’s tower as “his first public act as King Arthur’s chief minister” (Michelson 628). From that moment on, Merlin and Hank battle to “one-up” each other in various situations. Merlin attempts to use his “powers” to thwart Hank, who in turn employs intellect to overcome and usually beat Merlin. One such occasion occurs when Hank visits the Holy Fountain.

Upon his arrival at the Valley of Holiness, the abbot greets Hank and entreats him to “get to thy saving work” (220). However, when Hank learns Merlin is already on the scene and attempting to employ his tactics to return the fountain to working order, Hank states he will wait for the magician to finish before completing the task. As the abbot attempts to persuade Hank to help Merlin, Hank employs the weapon of words against his mystic competition by saying, “Merlin is a very good magician in a small way, and has quite a neat provincial reputation. He is struggling along, doing the best he can, and it would not be etiquette for me to take his job until he himself abandons it” (221). This belittling of the wizard’s ability undermines the abbot’s confidence in Merlin and makes the abbot want to “persuade [Merlin] to abandon it” (221). However, with an eye toward winning the battle, Hank talks the abbot out of attempting to dissuade Merlin from proceeding. One contrast between the means employed to fix the fountain is in the way which both Merlin and Hank approach the task. While Merlin stands outside the well-chamber and performs incantations, Hank enters the chamber, looks around and quickly surmises the problem. In regard to Merlin’s tactics Hank states:

| He has confounded not only the world and the truth, but himself as a storyteller. |

In this we see Twain’s disgust towards romanticists and their refusal to view or write what they actually see and not what they imagine happening or want to see. Instead romanticists, like Merlin, use their “disordered” minds and are “handicapped” with the belief that their way is the best and only way. Interesting to note though, is that after realizing some of the stones near the bottom of the well had fallen, thus allowing the water to escape, Hank was disappointed in not being able to utilize a
dynamite bomb, or realism, to fix the problem. Additionally, he planned on letting Merlin be the one to perform the “miracle” with the bomb, thus raising Merlin’s value as a magician. This inclination indicates the hierarchy between Hank and Merlin is beginning to shift as Twain begins to recognize the use and need for a bit of romanticism in literature.

Soon the war of words becomes a physical altercation. Before long, Merlin persuades Sir Sagramour, one of King Arthur’s knights, to challenge Hank to a joust. While Merlin may hope to remain in the background and pull Sir Sagramour’s strings, it is not to be. Twain states that:

There was no talk in all Britain of anything but this combat [...] not because a tournament was a great matter [...] it was born of the fact that all the nation knew that this was not to be a duel between mere men, so to speak, but a duel between two mighty magicians; a duel not of muscle but of mind, not of human skill but the superhuman art and craft; a final struggle for supremacy between the two master enchanters of the age [...] Yes, all the world knew it was going to be in reality a duel between Merlin and me, a measuring of his magic powers against mine (404).

So Merlin gets to work creating “spirits of the air a fleecy veil which would render” (404) Sir Sagramour “invisible” to Hank, but visible to anyone else. This act by Merlin reiterates his personal delusions in believing he has the power to perform such an act of magic. “Merlin has so muddled the truth with fantasies and exaggerations that he can no longer recognize a reality. Confounding not only the world and the truth, but himself as a storyteller. Merlin is literary romance at its destructive, self-destructive worst” (Michelson 619). And destructive Merlin is. Exercising his future knowledge, Hank employs a lasso and soundly beats Sir Sagramour as well as seven other knights with a gun. The instigator? Merlin and his failed attempt to change the hierarchal standing between himself and Hank.

The greatest indication of Twain’s “war with himself,” as well as binary opposition between romanticism and realism, occurs at the Battle of the Sand-Belt. Having been an indirect source of an Interdiction by the Church, and being decried by the Church itself, Hank takes his final stand within Merlin’s old cave; a symbol of the previous age of romanticism. With all of Hank’s grand efforts to enact societal changes, he realizes his attempt to change the misguided and idealistic beliefs of the inhabitants of Camelot are ineffective. Hank states:

I began to get this large and disenchanting fact through my head: that the mass of the nation had swung their caps and shouted for the republic for about one day, and there an end! The Church, the nobles, and the gentry then turned one grand, all-disapproving frown upon them and shrivelled them into sheep! (448).

At the first sign of the Church moving against Hank and all he did, the common folk were the first to join the bandwagon. “Why, even the very men who had lately been slaves were in the ‘righteous cause,’ and glorifying it, praying for it, sentimentally slabbering over it” (448). And with this great army of people preparing to march against Hank, he had only Clarence and fifty-two boys standing with him. Perhaps Twain realizes that an overnight change in styles of writing, similar to what Hank had attempted in Camelot, is impossible. This is apparent in his letter to the Knights where he states: “We know that at the utmost you cannot bring against us above five and twenty thousand knights. Therefore, you have no chance–none whatever. Reflect: we are well equipped, well fortified, we number 54. Fifty-four what? Men? No, minds” (454). Ultimately, after ten minutes of battle between Hank’s forces and those of the Church, Hank states, “twenty-five thousand men lay dead around us” (461). Twenty-five thousand symbols of romanticism; knights, peasants, squires, and other inhabitants of Camelot, were dead. In the final bid for supremacy after Hank is wounded, Merlin sneaks into Hank’s compound and shows he has true power by sending Hank into a trance “and [Hank] awakens back in the nineteenth century, with ‘an abyss of thirteen centuries yawning between me and...all that is dear to me, all that could make life worth the living!'” (Hill 85). Thereby we see that romanticism, shown in the
form of Merlin, does have true power within literary circles and the binary hierarchy first supposed to portray realism as more important than romanticism is turned on its head. Merlin/romanticism overcomes Hank/realism, ultimately putting Hank to sleep for 1300 years.

Although Twain may have set out in writing A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court as a rail against romanticism and sentimentality found in writing before him, it is clear that by implementing binary opposition Twain realizes the merits and need of romanticism, in some part, within literature. This is apparent after slaughtering so many men, and being surrounded by the dead that Hank realizes “we had conquered; in turn we were conquered” (464). Hank fails because “the world is too much for one man to change” (Michelson 631). We cannot blithely discard and throw away those beliefs, views and tactics that lead us to where we are. As Michelson states, “Romance is both a problem and an advantage for the novelist, whether realistic or not his inclinations. As a mode, romance is an absurdity, a thing of beauty, and opportunity, and a threat” (616). An author can fight, battle and rail against a form of writing, but Twain realizes that it is impossible to write a truly pure realist piece of literature because, as in all life, literature is built upon the precepts and ideas that proceeded. “If [Twain] was a realist in his language … he was also an archromantic … Wild coincidences, improbable changelings, melodramatic courtroom climaxes, dues ex machina denouments, supernatural visiters, dream visions are the stuff of pure romanticism” (Hill 93). The romantic tenets in some part; be it one character who stands out among the others due to some special quality or a sentimental view another character has, will always be present within literature. Literature is always evolving and with the evolution comes the assimilation all things before.

WORKS CITED


