

The Little Engine That Couldn't: Societal Fears, Upward Mobility,  
and the Failure of Technology in Mark Twain's Works

*Dana Sliva*

Born in 1835, Mark Twain became one of the most respected and admired writers of his era (Hartman). A self-proclaimed "typical American," Twain led an extraordinary life; aside from his writing, Twain traveled to the Holy Land, piloted riverboats on the Mississippi, and unsuccessfully panned for silver in Nevada (Hartman). While these feats seem anything but ordinary, Twain displayed the typical American spirit of upward mobility (Hartman). Like his father before him, Twain chased fortune, always seeking something bigger and better than what he currently had (Hartman). In his short story "Cannibalism in the Cars" and his novel *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, Twain explores the age of upward mobility and addresses his contemporaries' societal fears by examining the failure of technology.

In "Cannibalism in the Cars," the steam engine serves as the medium through which Twain explores societal tensions. Twain wrote during the post-Civil War era known as Reconstruction, when the "re-United States was in the midst of...a severe [cultural and social] reorganization" (Davis and Hurm 49). In "Cannibalism in the Cars," the speaker begins his tale by stating, "On the 19<sup>th</sup> of December, 1853, I started from St. Louis on the evening train bound for Chicago" (Twain, "Cannibalism" 9). The train's suspension from West to East and South to North—St. Louis is southwest of Chicago—signifies both cultural and class differences in Twain's society. For example, many former slaves sought refuge in the North, pointing to its social progression and acceptance when compared to the Jim Crow South. While Twain associates the East with civilization, industry, and science, his West stands for past communal values in his own life. At the age of eighteen, Twain left Hannibal, Missouri, to pursue what he

considered a better life as a printer in the East (Hartman). Representing the societal fears of cultural realignment, the train, trapped “on the bleak prairie, fifty miles from any house,” is in limbo between the status quo and the socially mobile future (Twain, “Cannibalism” 10). Soon after the train halts, murder and cannibalism ensue, metaphorically representing society’s fear of major cultural realignments, fear that culture itself will ultimately fail.

Twain, who was personally fascinated by inventions, also uses the advent of the train to represent the societal fear of technological failure in “Cannibalism in the Cars.” As the age of upward mobility, the nineteenth century emphasized “evolution, progress, and refinement” (Davis and Hurm 51). In many ways, “Cannibalism in the Cars” projects the fear that technology will be defeated by a force greater than itself, such as nature; since technology is human-produced, humans would also be conquered. For instance, the passengers “discovered that the last grand charge the engine had made upon the enemy [meaning the snow] had broken the fore-and-aft shaft of the driving wheel” (Twain, “Cannibalism” 10). Despite the technological achievement of the steam engine, humans are helpless against the unruly and chaotic forces of nature. The stopping of the train by nature represents not only the end of progress, but the end of civilization as well; soon thereafter, the passengers resort to cannibalism.

Published in 1889—some twenty-one years after “Cannibalism in the Cars”—*A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court*, like its predecessor, metaphorically equates societal tensions and technological shortcomings. The last third of Twain’s turbulent century gave rise to American populism, “a political philosophy that holds that the common person’s interests are oppressed or hindered by the elite in society, and that the instruments of the state need to be grasped from this self-serving elite and used for the benefit and advancement of the people as a whole” (Lerer 472). Although Twain never strongly subscribed to populist ideals such as

“government ownership of the railroads, curbs on the power of Wall Street, and the destruction of monopolies,” his indignation with the upper echelons of society caused him to sympathize with the everyperson (Smith 143). Twain’s leading man in *Connecticut Yankee*, Hank Morgan, represents the populist utopia of a successful, working-class citizen:

My father was a blacksmith, my uncle was a horse doctor, and I was both...Then I went over to the great arms factory and learned my real trade [as a factory workman]...[I] learned to make everything; guns, revolvers, cannon, boilers, engines...Why, I could make anything a body wanted...and if there wasn’t any quick newfangled way to make a thing, I could invent one ...I became head superintendent; had a couple thousand men under me (Twain, *A Connecticut* 4)

Although Hank assumes a humble social and economic position in nineteenth century America, he eventually becomes the executive head of a vast industrial system in Arthurian Britain.

Affirming the populist belief that the common sense of the average person is more useful than academic theories, Twain comments that “this Yankee of mine has neither the refinement nor the weakness of a college education; he is a perfect ignoramus” (qtd. in Lerer 475).

Twain’s “ignoramus” Hank, full of populist thought and technological blueprints, represents the nineteenth century fear of societal change and technology. After adjusting to his new surroundings in Camelot, Hank, viewing “most of King Arthur’s British nation [as] slaves,” resolves to “civilize” the kingdom through social and political reform (Twain, *A Connecticut* 38). In order to usher in change, Hank turns to technology and industry, which Twain claims led to societal improvements in America (Smith 153). Intending to transform Arthur’s land into a republic through an industrial revolution, Hank, governed by populist thought, “trains the people

in the school of experience by their operation of machines that [would] create modern civilization” (Smith 157):

I had the beginnings of all sorts of industries under way—nuclei of future vast factories, the iron and steel missionaries of my future civilization. In these were gathered together the brightest young minds I could find...I was training a crowd of ignorant folk into experts—experts in every sort of handiwork and scientific calling...Unsuspected by this dark land, I had the civilization of the nineteenth century booming under its very nose! (Twain, *A Connecticut* 47-8)

While Hank intends for his technological innovations to revamp the kingdom, the Battle of the Sand Belt, which pits the status quo of the kingdom against Hank’s radical reforms, is a technology-induced disaster. On the eve of the Battle, Hank destroys his factories, fearing that “the enemy [would] turn our own weapons against us” (Twain, *A Connecticut* 258). The obliteration of Hank’s factories by his own hands speaks to the self-destructive nature of both technology and civilization, since the latter results from the former. The Battle itself, which symbolically represents the nineteenth century technological and social battleground of uncertainty, results in the death of thirty thousand knights: “As to destruction of life, it was amazing. Moreover, it was beyond estimate. Of course we could not *count* the dead, because they did not exist as individuals, but merely as homogeneous protoplasm” (Twain, *A Connecticut* 258). Exemplifying the doubts of people in the age of upward mobility, Hank’s technological “improvements” and populist ideals have a dehumanizing effect, where one loses one’s individuality to machinery and forward thinking.

Twain continues to address societal uncertainties in *Connecticut Yankee* through the introduction of the telephone. Invented in 1877, “the telephone not only revolutionized the

passage of information but also changed irrevocably social relationships in late-nineteenth-century America” (Lerer 474). For instance, prior to the telephone, people addressed one another according to one’s social class (Lerer 475). Without the social status cues of dress and mannerisms, the conundrum for the telephone was how one should greet someone when the recipient’s class and gender was unknown (Lerer 475). The solution, “hello,” was a class and gender neutral telephone greeting; it became so popular among Americans that early telephone operators came to be known as “hello-girls” (Lerer 475-6). The introduction of technologically-inspired language in a class-conscious culture illustrates the social dichotomy of the new against the old in the age of upward mobility. Epitomizing the societal fear of an evolving *lingua franca*, Sandy names her baby Hello-Central, the salutation directed toward a hello-girl, after misinterpreting Hank, who talks in his sleep:

In my dreams, along at first, I still wandered thirteen centuries away, and my unsatisfied spirit went calling and harking all up and down the unreplying vacancies of a vanished world. Many a time Sandy heard that imploring cry come from my lips in my sleep. With a grand magnanimity she saddled that cry of mine upon our child, conceiving it to be the name of some lost darling of mine.

(Twain, *A Connecticut Yankee* 243)

While Sandy naming her child Hello-Central is comedic—for Hello-Central signals the occupation of Hank’s lost love, not her name—it also represents the nineteenth century distrust and skepticism of the evolving social order via language.

Furthermore, the telephone in *Connecticut Yankee* symbolizes the nineteenth century fear that upward mobility will strip people of their humanity. In an 1880 sketch entitled “A Telephone Conversation,” “Twain describes a scene in which a husband listens to his wife on the

telephone and hears a conversation with only one end to it” (Fulton 34): “Yes? Why, how did that happen? (Pause.) What did you say? (Pause.) Oh, no, I don’t think it was. (Pause.) No! Oh, no, I didn’t mean that.” (qtd. in Fulton 35). The humor in Twain’s sketch revolves around the societal fear that the telephone, intended to facilitate communication, actually hinders it, thus undermining the effectiveness of speech, a strictly human trait (Fulton 35). Hank suffers a similar problem in *Connecticut Yankee* when the location of his fountain miracle is miscommunicated as the “Valley of Hellishness” instead of the “Valley of Holiness:” “Confound a telephone...It is the very demon for conveying similarities of sound that are miracles of divergence from similarity of sense” (Twain, *A Connecticut* 135). Complicating communication, the telephone embodies the fear that technology may actually undermine humanity rather than elevate it.

In both the short story “Cannibalism in the Cars” and the novel *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court*, Twain manifests the country’s reservations upon entering a new societal era through technological metaphors. The failure of both the steam engine in “Cannibalism” and the telephone in *Connecticut Yankee* symbolizes the latent fears of those in the age of upward mobility, fears that social, cultural, political, and technological change will damn the human race. Twain’s works transcend his trademark humor and instead represent the flawed human condition; nineteenth century Americans want progress yet fear it, want refinement yet practice crudeness. Masterfully articulating the cultural tug-of-war between traditional and progressive thought, Twain uses technological shortcomings in “Cannibalism” and *Connecticut Yankee* to represent the shifting social order in the age of upward mobility.

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