

Mark Twain's Progression from *A Connecticut Yankee to The Mysterious Stranger*

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ABSTRACT

The Mysterious Stranger manuscripts have always been set apart from Twain's earlier fiction as a consequence of the writer's aggravated pessimism in his last years and his intention to keep them unpublished. But there is a strong resemblance between these manuscripts and a novel published a decade before: *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*. The similarities between the main characters and their contradiction between meliorism and determinism, as well as the use of the iconoclastic power of satire against the same targets and a parallel manipulation of time and space, are all common features which help understand *The Mysterious Stranger* as a progression from ideas already latent in *A Connecticut Yankee*.

Introduction

In a letter written to William D. Howells in 1899, Mark Twain stated:

For several years I have been intending to stop writing for print as soon as I could afford it. At last I can afford it, and have put the potboiler pen away. What I have been wanting is a chance to write a book without reserves—a book which should take account of no one's feelings, and no one's prejudices, opinions, beliefs, hopes, illusions, delusions: a book which should say my say, right out of my heart, in the plainest language and without a limitation of any sort. I judged that that would be an unimaginable luxury, heaven on earth . . . It is under way, now, and it is a luxury! an intellectual drunk.¹

The critics have identified this book as one of the manuscripts of *The Mysterious Stranger*,² a story about a «mysterious stranger» (whose name was Young Satan or No. 44 depending on the manuscript) that Twain tried to write several times between 1897 and 1908. He never finished any of his attempts, but six years after his death in 1910 his official biographer and literary executor A. B. Paine published *The Mysterious Stranger: A Romance*, an editorial fraud where Paine used parts of the manuscripts to suit his idea of what Twain had tried to write. The original manuscripts («The Chronicle of Young Satan,» «Schoolhouse Hill» and «No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger») were first published in 1968 by W. M. Gibson. Since then, and, following Twain's own words,

the critics have continued to emphasize a variety of themes and techniques that set these «dark» manuscripts apart from Twain's earlier fiction, as a consequence of his desire not to publish the book.

Furthermore, several critics (Van Wyck Brooks and Bernard De Voto among them³) have stressed the series of catastrophes that took place in the life of Twain in the 1890's and that led him to a completely pessimistic view of life and even to his failure to finish most of the manuscripts that he started. Economic bankruptcy forced him to give a lecture tour around the world to pay off his debt; his daughter Susy died in 1896 and his wife in 1904; his daughter Jean suffered epileptic attacks that finally led to her death in 1909. All of these events seem to have aggravated Twain's pessimism and his deterministic view of the world, whose final result was *The Mysterious Stranger*.

My purpose in this paper is, without denying the differences existing between *The Mysterious Stranger* and Twain's earlier books, to show the thematic and formal connections between these three manuscripts and a novel published in 1889, before all of those events had taken place in Twain's life: *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*. I will first trace the similarities between Satan or No. 44 and Hank Morgan to proceed later with similar techniques and themes.

Hank vs. Satan and No. 44

Hank Morgan, Satan and No. 44 should not be considered as isolated characters but rather as part of a series of what Paul E. Baender calls «transcendent figures,» a series that would also include the stranger in «The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg,» Pudd'n'head Wilson and, arguably, Joan of Arc. Henry Nash Smith's description of these characters is as follows:

They are isolated by their intellectual superiority to the community; they are contemptuous of mankind in general; and they have more than ordinary power.⁴

All these traits are valid for Hank as well as Satan/No. 44, but let us examine them more closely. In the first place, they are all mysterious strangers: nobody knows their origin. The reader is aware of it in every case except for No. 44 in «No. 44» (who is consistently, and strictly speaking, the only mysterious stranger) and this knowledge is shared by Young Satan's initiates (Theodor, Seppi and Nickolaus) and No. 44's in «Schoolhouse» (Mr. Hotchkiss). Clarence is the counterpart of these initiates, because although he does not know Hank's ultimate origin, he learns from him most of the technical knowledge that constitutes the key to his attempt at the transformation of that world.

The most obvious difference between Hank and his counterparts in *The Mysterious Stranger* is that Hank is a man and Satan and No. 44 are angels, though they also have diabolical features. But to the inhabitants of sixth century Britain, Hank is as supra-human as Satan/No.44 are to the communities they visit. He has a superior knowledge that allows him to perform what are miracles to his audience, even though the nineteenth or nineteenth century reader knows they are not.

Hank is «a magician with a touch of exhibitionism that reflects the «circus side» of Mark Twain» as H. N. Smith puts it.⁵ Hank himself recognizes his «circus side»: «for never do I care to do a thing in a quiet way; it's got to be theatrical or I don't take any

interest in it,»⁶ just as No. 44 does: «I love shows and spectacles, and stunning dramatics, and I love to astonish people, and show off, and be and do all the gaudy things a boy loves to be and do.»⁷ Twain himself could have signed both statements, or at least that is what can be inferred by his continuous use of circus-like spectacles throughout his works.

One of the spectacles that he uses both in *A Connecticut Yankee* and «No. 44» is an eclipse. The obvious difference is that Hank does not create one but merely foretells it, while No. 44's supernatural power allows him to «do an eclipse, not a real one, but an artificial one» (388) as background for his «transfiguration.» And, as S. Kahn indicates, «Forty-four, like the Yankee, undercuts his own 'miracle'»⁸ for the benefit of the reader by saying that «it beat Barnum and Bailey hands down, and was by as much as several shades too good for the provinces» (391). It is the same humorous attitude shown by Hank when he reminds the reader that «Columbus, or Cortez [sic], or one of those people, played an eclipse as a saving trump once . . . and it wouldn't be any plagiarism either, because I should get it in nearly a thousand years ahead of those parties» (24). Twain could never resist the temptation of a good joke, and this attitude is transferred to his characters Hank and No. 44, at least when talking to their initiates or writing to the reader.

This «circus side» is soon shared by Hank's initiate, Clarence, when he mock-herogically saves Hank and King Arthur with his five hundred knights on bicycles: «Good deal of a surprise, wasn't it? I knew you'd like it. I've had the boys practicing, this long time, privately; and just hungry for a chance to show off» (231); but it is also shared by Satan's disciple, Theodor: «My appetite was not satisfied, it was only sharpened; I wanted to see Satan show off some more» (172); and even by the boys in «School-house»: «the schoolboys looked on, dazed, and rather frightened at the woman's spectacular distress, but fascinated with the show and glad to be there and see it» (189).

While these statements hint at a moral lesson about how easily man forgets other people's distress as long as he is entertained, the presentation of these satanic miracles side by side with «orthodox» miracles suggests a deeper meaning. Thus, the confrontations between Hank and Merlin are paralleled in *The Mysterious Stranger* not only by Young Satan's encounter with a fake magician in an Indian palace and by No. 44's pretended submission to Balthasar the Magician, but also by their confrontations with Father Adolf. This priest appears as one more juggler, keeping balls in the air and throwing summersaults, and continuously defeated by Satan/No. 44's «true» magic. Father Adolf's miracles as well as those mentioned by Father Peter in the middle section of «No. 44» appear therefore as fake miracles, as untrue as the magicians'. This inversion of values is stressed in a few cases through the performance of miracles with blasphemous connotations, like No. 44's pretending to stop after hearing the mention of the name of God, his own transfiguration or Young Satan's multiplication of the fish and the loaves.

Both Satan/No.44 and Hank are outsiders in a closed community, and the initial response of the insiders is, like in «The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg» and *Pudd'n'head Wilson*, one of contempt and even aggression. Thus, Hank is captured by Sir Kay the Seneschal, and No. 44 suffers the disdain and physical attack of the workers in the print-shop. But after they have performed their astonishing deeds, people look at

them with awe and respectful admiration, mixed with a fascination similar to that of their initiates.

In their attitude towards those people Satan/No.44 and Hank share a basic contradiction, probably a result of Twain's own debate between meliorism and determinism. Hank despises the people that he encounters in sixth century Britain («more or less tame animals,» 32), and similarly, to Satan «the people of your village are nothing . . . Man is to me as the red spider is to the elephant . . . The elephant is indifferent, I am indifferent» (113). The presence of this detached satiric observer allows Twain to direct his diatribe against everything he considered despicable, including man, because Hank feels «ashamed of the human race» (105) «that has been so tediously and ostentatiously and unprofitably developed» from an «Adam-clam or grasshoper or monkey» (91). This attitude is shared by No. 44 and Satan, who *know* that animals are superior to men. Hank's contempt leads him to say «there are times when one would like to hang the whole race and finish the farce» (183) and in the end to cruelly slaughter twenty-five thousand knights. A similarly apocalyptic action is performed by Satan when he thoughtlessly destroys the world of Liliputians that he himself had created, in a way that suggests Twain's own ideas about God.

But although Satan is able to destroy a whole race of men, and to change carelessly the destinies of a few people to send them to hell, «there is the overwhelming evidence of his concern: his willingness to help the boys and the people they worry about, and in particular the tone of anger and outrage that pervades every one of his lengthy comments about civilization.»⁹ In «Schoolhouse» this desire to save men is made more explicit: «our plan will be confined to ameliorating the condition of the race in some ways in *this* life» (217). And even in «No. 44» the same purpose of salvation can be found in the «Conclusion of the Book,» when No. 44 reveals to August the true nature of life. In a parallel way, Hank wants to make the condition of the race better by bringing industrialization and democracy. He states his purpose in different moments of the book:

First, a modified monarchy, till Arthur's days were done, then the destruction of the throne, nobility abolished, every member of it bound out to some useful trade, universal suffrage instituted, and the whole government placed in the hands of the men and women of the nation there to remain. Yes, there was no occasion to give up my dream yet awhile (183).

As we saw, his dream is going to fail tragically. But the problem still remains: How can we come to terms with characters like Hank, Satan or No. 44, who are indifferent to, or despise, the human race, and at the same time want to ameliorate its condition? As W. Macnaughton indicates,¹⁰ the problem lies probably on Twain's own debate between meliorism and determinism. The deterministic view of the world held by Satan and No. 44 is contradictory with any attempt at correcting human injustice through satire.

In any event, the relationship between Hank Morgan and Satan/No. 44 is clear, and their differences are essentially a matter of degree: from limited technical power to unlimited power, from a superior man to an angel, from apparent miracles to real miracles, from a satiric detachment to the elephant indifferent to the spider, etc., Satan is the culmination of some traits already present in Hank. The difference of tone in the presentation of both characters is also due to the narrative voice: we know Hank's

secret because *he* tells us, whereas Satan's and No. 44's images are filtered through Theodor's and August's minds and therefore magnified.

Techniques

As far as literary techniques are concerned, the first general connection that can be established is that in both works Twain uses fictional means to express his own philosophical, political and moral ideas. The plot is a mixture of stories and comments (in the form of dialogues or soliloquies) on anything from slavery to political economy, from the Boer War to the Moral Sense. But the combination of ideology and fiction is probably more fluid in *A Connecticut Yankee* than in *The Mysterious Stranger*, where the ideas predominate over the narrative, the plot being sometimes a mere excuse for the display of Twain's ideas.

The iconoclastic power of satiric laughter as described by Satan has often been quoted («Against the assault of laughter nothing can stand,» 166), but not so often related to Hank's procedures to destroy knighthood: «extinguishing knighthood by making it grotesque and absurd» (115). Both Satan and Hank share a knowledge about the immense power of satire and ridicule to criticize injustice. Satan uses it in a context where human beings are not likely to laugh: a hanging. And with it he manages to show all the cruelty and stupidity of the action. Hank's and Satan's technique is, I believe, an extension of Twain's. In *A Connecticut Yankee* he is laughing at a false, romanticized idea of the past and the 19th century optimistic view of progress, and therefore destroying a false image. In *The Mysterious Stranger* he is laughing at something far more serious: the ingenuous concept of the goodness of God and man, and all the common optimistic views of life. He satirizes these views and, in a symbolical way, destroys life on this planet in Satan's reckless destruction of the world or in the final solipsistic chapter of «No. 44.»

Another technique used by Twain in both books is the manipulation of time and space. In a way, he was forced to do it: he had gone East in *The Innocents Abroad* and in *A Tramp Abroad*, West in *Roughing It*, back to his origins in *Life on the Mississippi*. The manipulation of time and space allows him to move anywhere at any moment and therefore widen the possibilities of satire.

Thus Hank appears in Britain and Theodor and August travel in seconds throughout the world, to suit Satan/No. 44's comments on the damned human race. But it is the temporal dimension that Twain breaks more often. No. 44 is able to turn time backwards and go to the past or the future; since his knowledge is not constricted by time or space, he can criticize events that were contemporary for Twain, like the Christian Science movement. Satan uses this procedure more extensively to criticize Twain's past and present, including colonial and imperialistic wars, the Pope and his infallibility, the hypocritical missionaries, etc., most of the political problems that Twain was interested in at that time.

Hank's knowledge, on the other hand, is simply the result of his experience, but his thirteen centuries' jump back allows him to predict the eclipse and serves Twain to criticize contemporary facts in their reflection on sixth century Britain. I have already alluded to his attacks directed at the concept of progress (made explicit by Satan in the «Chronicle» when he scorns the «history of the progress of the human race,» 134), but

also Hank's comments on sixth century political economy should be seen as Twain's comments on contemporary notions such as protectionism or free market. H. N. Smith¹¹ draws an analogy between sixth century Britain and the American South, an analogy made explicit by Twain through Hank's opinions about slavery and the attitude of the «free» peasants towards it, similar to the «'poor whites' of our South who were always despised and frequently insulted by the slave-lords around them» (181).

Themes

One of the reasons for the complexity of *A Connecticut Yankee* is that the objects of Twain's satire are both the society Hank is transported to and Hank Morgan himself. This permits Twain to criticize the romanticized vision of the past showing the misery and injustice existing in the Medieval Ages, while attacking his contemporaries' notion of progress.

These themes are not exclusive to *A Connecticut Yankee*. Although they were not Twain's predominant target in *The Mysterious Stranger*, references to them can be found in his different attempts to write the story about the mysterious stranger. I have already cited Satan's comments on the so-called progress of civilization, but Twain also uses the temporal setting of the «Chronicle» and «No. 44» (1702 and 1490 respectively) to direct his satiric eye towards negative aspects of the past centuries. Thus, witch-hunting is related to «the habit of curing people by devilish arts, such as bathing them, washing them and nourishing them» (151). This can be compared to the Holy Fountain and Hank's comments about people's fear to wash. And Herr Stein's challenge and defeat of the medieval guilds is similar to Hank's actions against chivalry.

But probably the main target of Twain in the past is religious fanaticism, and specifically the Catholic Church. Both *A Connecticut Yankee* and *The Mysterious Stranger* are located in countries controlled by the Catholic Church. It has been shown how Satan/No. 44's main enemy is Father Adolf and how orthodox and heterodox miracles are juxtaposed, stressing the spectacular and artificial side of the Catholic Church. The Church is shown as the enemy of any kind of progress both in «No. 44» (where «the Church was opposed to the cheapening of books and the indiscriminate dissemination of knowledge,» 230) and in *A Connecticut Yankee*, where it is the cause of most injustices and the main opposition to Hank's revolutionary plans. The Church finally wins, and that is the main reason for the tragic end to those plans. The instrument used by the Church against Hank is precisely the reason for the villagers' fear in the «Chronicle»: the interdict or censure withdrawing most sacraments and Christian burial from a certain district.

But the attack on the Church goes a step further in *The Mysterious Stranger*. While Hank's plan was to «set up the Protestant faith in its ruins —not as an Established Church, but a go-as-you-please one» (242), No. 44's answer to August's suggestion that he should become a Christian is that he would «be the only one» (302). Twain's diatribe in his last manuscripts involves not only the Catholic Church, but every Church and even God, a God

who could make good children as easily as bad, yet preferred to make bad ones; who could have made every one of them happy, yet never made a single happy one . . . who mouths justice and invented hell . . . who frowns upon crimes, yet commits them

all . . . and finally, with altogether divine obtuseness, invites this poor abused slave to worship him (405).

Another favorite theme of Twain's that appears in both works is the behavior of human beings in a mob. They lose their independence and freedom and are able to commit a crime for fear of the rest. Thus, August does not dare to stand up against the printers to come out in defence of No. 44, just like Theodor when he throws a stone at a supposed witch, «although in my heart I was sorry for her» (152), or Hank's friend, Marco, who «helped to hang my neighbors for that it were peril to my own life to show lack of zeal in the master's cause» (182). Men are like the boys and girls «playing mob» (184) that Hank encounters («it was some more human nature,» he says), and the only ones to stand up against the mob are Satan in the «Chronicle» and Doangiveadam in «No. 44,» resembling Colonel Sherburn's attitude in the well-known passage of *Huckleberry Finn*.

Another connection between *Huckleberry Finn* and *A Connecticut Yankee* is Twain's treatment of the moral conscience, seen as something external and negative. Thus, Huck, forced to decide between his conscience and his heart, between betraying Jim or saving him, decides to «go to hell»¹² and symbolically does what he states later: «If I had a yaller dog that didn't know no more than a person's conscience does, I would pison him. It takes up more room than all the rest of a person's insides, and yet ain't no good, nohow» (p. 183). This is almost identical to Hank's ideas about conscience: «If I had the remaking of man, he wouldn't have any conscience . . . I know it is more trouble and bother to me than anything else I started with» (92-93).

In *The Mysterious Stranger* Twain dwells upon a similar concept, but the light and humorous aspect is now lost, and replaced by dark and almost tragic connotations:

Man is made of dirt —I saw him made . . . Man is a museum of disgusting diseases, a home of impurities; he comes to-day and is gone to-morrow, he begins as dirt and departs as a stench . . . And man has the *Moral Sense*. You understand? he has the *Moral Sense* (55).

Satan's explanations hurt August («it wounded me . . . I, for one, was depressed,» 55) as much as his comparisons of man with the so-called lower animals. Man is worse than animals because he has a Moral Sense that gives him a choice between right and wrong, and «in nine cases out of ten he prefers the wrong» (72-73). In «Schoolhouse» No. 44 insists on the same subject: man is prone to evil as the sparks to fly upward» (216), while in «No. 44» that task is in charge of August's Duplicate: «We have no morals; the angels have none; morals are for the impure; we have no principles, those chains are for men» (370). In this manuscript, No. 44's revelations are delayed until the last chapter, where the negation of morals is just a part of the absolute negation of life.

The evolution from Hank's humorous scorn of conscience to Satan's rational rejection of Moral Sense and even man is parallel to the change from the notion of training in *A Connecticut Yankee* to the determinism of *The Mysterious Stranger*. Hank talks often about the importance of training and education as a key to explain the reasons for the different behavior of King Arthur's subjects and his own. For instance, to explain how Sandy believes to be princesses what Hank's eyes see as hogs, he says: «My land, the power of training! Of influence! Of education! It can bring a body up to believe anything» (107). And he uses the same explanation to account for Queen

Morgan's behavior: «training is everything . . . there is no such thing as nature; what we call by that misleading name is merely heredity and training» (91). Almost absolute determinism, true, but to Hank there is some freedom of action, some possibility of salvation: «all that I think about in this sad pilgrimage, this pathetic drift between the eternities, is to look out and humbly live a pure and high and blameless life, and save that one microscopic atom in me that is truly *me*» (91).

In contrast, in *The Mysterious Stranger* even «that one microscopic atom» is lost. Satan tells Theodor:

A child's first act knocks over the initial brick, and the rest will follow inexorably . . . Nothing can change the order of its life after the first event has determined it (115).

And No. 44 warns August again: «That which is not foreordained will not happen» (325).

The contradiction between Satan/No. 44's determinism and their attempts to change man's society have already been indicated. But there is an even more obvious contradiction between any meliorism and the «Conclusion of the Book.» What kind of morals could exist in a life that is «only a vision, a dream» (404)? Twain was not necessarily consistent in his writing, and we cannot expect perfect consistency in unfinished manuscripts that he did not even intend to have published.

That he had this idea in mind before writing the «Conclusion» can be seen in the frequent misperception of real but abnormal facts as dreams in the «Chronicle.» And «Schoolhouse» also shows another example when No. 44 sends Crazy Meadows and the black slaves to bed telling them «In the morning you will think it was a dream» (207). But this theme can also be traced back to *A Connecticut Yankee*. Hank is at first convinced that all that is happening to him is a dream:

What dream? Why, the dream that I am in Arthur's court —a person who never existed; and that I am talking to you, who are nothing but a work of the imagination (21).

And the very end is another step in the confusion of dreams and reality. When the writer goes to Hank's room he finds him muttering dreamily:

O, Sandy, you are come at last . . . Have I been sick long? It must be so; it seems months to me. And such dreams! Such strange and awful dreams, Sandy! Dreams that were as real as reality. . . . I seemed to be a creature out of a remote unborn age, centuries hence, and even that was as real as the rest (273-74).

What seemed a dream at first proved to be real, but even the «reality» of Hank's origin and his defeat at the end are denied as a dream. Hank is not able to distinguish between reality and appearance any more.

The analogy between the last chapters of *A Connecticut Yankee* and «No. 44» is clear. Probably in both cases Twain was looking for a way out, a way to finish the story in the first novel and an escapist way to his deterministic perceptions in «No. 44.» The difference is again one of degree. In *A Connecticut Yankee* Hank confused reality and dreams, but at least he accepted some sort of reality. In «No. 44» the negation of reality reaches everything but a thought:

There is no God, no universe, no human race, no earthly life, no heaven, no hell. It is all a Dream, a grotesque and foolish dream. Nothing exists but You. And You are but a *Thought* —a vagrant Thought, a useless Thought, a homeless Thought, wandering forlorn among the empty eternities! (405).

This last example complements the basic idea of this paper: although *The Mysterious Stranger* was not intended for publication and was written after Twain's pessimism had been aggravated by much personal misfortune, we can find the seeds for most of the themes of *The Mysterious Stranger in A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*. Aside from the use of similar techniques, Satan and No. 44 are the culmination of traits already existent in Hank Morgan; and Twain's determinism, his blasphemous attacks on God, his ideas about the Moral Sense and the inherent evil of man, and his final perception of life as a dream are not exclusive to *The Mysterious Stranger*, but can be better understood as a progression from ideas already latent in *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*.

Notes

1. *Mark Twain-Howells Letters*, quoted in William R. Macnaughton, *Mark Twain's Last Years As a Writer* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1979), p. 123.

2. *The Mysterious Stranger* will be used to refer to the three manuscripts as a whole, and «Chronicle,» «Schoolhouse» and «No. 44» will be used to refer to each of the manuscripts.

3. In articles reprinted in *Mark Twain's The Mysterious Stranger and the Critics*, John S. Tuckey, ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1968).

4. Both Baender and Smith are quoted from Sholom J. Khan, *Mark Twain's Mysterious Stranger: A Study of the Manuscript Texts* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1978), p. 17.

5. Henry Nash Smith, «Mark Twain's Images of Hannibal,» *The University of Texas Studies in English*, 37 (1958), 21.

6. Mark Twain, *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (New York: Bantam, 1981), p. 188. Henceforth, references to this edition will be made in the text.

7. Mark Twain, *The Mysterious Stranger Manuscripts*, William M. Gibson, ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), p. 386. From now on, references to this edition will be made in the text.

8. Kahn, p. 175.

9. Macnaughton, p. 138.

10. Macnaughton, pp 137-38.

11. Smith, pp. 13-18.

12. Mark Twain, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (New York: Norton, 1977), p. 169.

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