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# "Painted Fire": fire Imagery in Life on the Mississippi and A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court

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"Painted Fire":

Fire Imagery in Life on the Mississippi and  
A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court

Deborah T. Ketchum

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master  
of Arts in English at Longwood College, Farmville, Virginia, August 1998.

"Painted Fire":

Fire Imagery in Life on the Mississippi and

A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court

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## Introduction

Traditionally, Mark Twain is remembered for his humor. Early in his career, he was sometimes labeled a Southwestern humorist, a genre that includes violent, slapstick comedy. However, Twain uses violent imagery that extends beyond his Southwestern humor and appears in his Realistic novels. Many of these violent images are connected to fire and originate in Twain's past.

Because of the violence and trauma that does appear in Mark Twain's works, critics, like Philip Young in "Huckleberry Finn: The Little Lower Layer," have found enough ammunition to claim that his books are "gory," contain "brutal episodes," and are unusually graphic (427). Gary Arpin notes that critics describe Twain's novels as "coarse fun" and "gutter realism" (3). Hamlin Hill, in his introduction to Roughing It (1871), describes how The Guardian disapproved of Twain in 1872 because he was "unable to distinguish between the picturesque and the grotesque" (15). He also notes how both The Atlantic Monthly and The Overland label his literature "grotesque" (Hill 15). The critics are obviously made uncomfortable by the trauma and violence found in Twain's stories.

However, the use of violence and trauma in literature is commonplace, providing one avenue that leads to conflict. Readers are accustomed to violence, even realistic violence, in their stories. What sets Twain apart is the use of violence in contrast to his humor. Readers expect trauma in their drama. They do not expect it in their comedies, however, and are uncomfortable when they find it.

For example, Shakespeare's plays are clearly divided into histories, comedies, and tragedies. One may find humor in Shakespeare's tragedies: Mercutio puns his way

into death with the statement, “Ask for me tomorrow and you will find me a grave man” (Shakespeare 643). This is acceptable because one is reading Romeo and Juliet for the drama and the tragedy; the comic relief is an added bonus.

However, readers do not expect to find true trauma and violence in Shakespeare’s comedies. For instance, in The Taming of the Shrew, Kate becomes physically abusive with many individuals in a boisterous fashion, but the force is slapstick, comic. Kate does not take a butcher knife and stab Petruchio to death. As a result, the violence does not upset the comedy; the reader remembers the humor, not the violence.

Most readers associate Twain with humorous stories. Like Shakespeare in The Taming of the Shrew, Twain does use slapstick violence. Just as approximate rhyme does not interrupt the movement of a poem, this slapstick violence does not interfere with the comic flow of the literature. For instance, Roughing It narrates how a man dies:

he got nipped by the machinery in a carpet factory and went through in less than a quarter of a minute; his widder bought the piece of carpet that had his remains wove in, and people come a hundred mile to ‘tend the funeral. There was fourteen yards in the piece. She wouldn’t let them roll him up, but planted him just so-- full length. (389)

This is a violent, gory experience, but Twain wraps the description in humor and encloses it in a novel noted for humorous anecdotes. Exaggeration and parody, two techniques frequently used by Twain to create humor, undercut the violence; the

brutality does not seem real. As a result, the violence does not stand out; the humor does.

However, much of the force found in Twain's literature is not slapstick; it is real, graphic, and troubling. Similar to the effect off rhyme has upon a poem, the discovery of true violence does interrupt the comic flow; it troubles readers, and lingers in memory. As a result, Twain emphasizes his themes with violence. An example of this imagery appears in The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn after Huck observes the murder of Boggs: "They tore open his shirt first, and I seen where one of the bullets went in. He made about a dozen long gasps . . . and after that he laid still; he was dead" (Twain, Huck 87). There is no humor in this image. Like so many other episodes of violence found in Twain's stories, he creates an image that haunts the reader due to its simplicity. Boggs's unjust murder emphasizes the savagery and cruelty of mankind, a recurring theme in Twain's literature.

Occasionally, however, Twain does combine humor and troubling violence in his non-fiction. In his autobiographical accounts, Twain will sometimes follow a violent or traumatic story with a light-hearted pun or anecdote. Although the violence interrupts the comic flow, the comedy does not lessen the tragedy. In contrast to the violence found in Twain's fiction, it is easier to accept the combination of tragedy and comic relief in his non-fiction; readers admire Twain for laughing in the face of adversity. This combination of mild humor and autobiographical violence creates what Bernard DeVoto calls "tragic laughter" (America 268).

Lenore Terr, the psychiatrist credited with developing treatment for childhood trauma, claims that there is a connection between childhood trauma and writers. She

claims that childhood trauma can “set the theme for a life’s work” (Terr 187). She also states that traumatized writers will return to the violent stories of their childhood again and again, repeating the traumatic occurrence in words. Cynthia Monahon, a psychologist and author, agrees with Dr. Terr. Monahon defines trauma as “an extraordinarily frightening event that overwhelms the victim with feelings of terror and helplessness” (8). Twain uses traumatic and violent episodes in his literature.

Authors tend to write about subjects with which they are familiar. By applying Monahon’s definition of trauma to the claims of Twain and his numerous biographers, Twain did apparently experience or witness several events that a child would find traumatic. Albert Bigelow Paine reports several incidents of trauma in his book, The Boy’s Life of Mark Twain (1944). According to Paine, Twain discovered the drowned body of a runaway slave, witnessed an attempted rape, watched an attempted murder and a murder take place, and had nine near escapes from drowning. Mark Twain, in The Autobiography of Mark Twain (1917), verifies some of these accounts and adds others. Twain claims that he barely survived a cholera and a measles epidemic that “made a most alarming slaughter among the little people” (Auto 77). He also writes that “there was the slave man who was struck down with a chunk of slag for some small offense; I watched him die” (41).

Milton Meltzer, in Mark Twain: A Writer’s Life (1985), records another event that a child may have found traumatizing. Meltzer writes that after John Clemens, Samuel’s father, died of pneumonia, Samuel then, “through a keyhole, watched the family doctor dissect the body. That night and for several nights running, Sam walked about the house in his sleep with a sheet wrapped around him” (9). The claim that

Twain witnessed the autopsy of his father is recorded earlier in Sam Clemens of Hannibal (1952) by Dixon Wecter. Wecter cites a reference in Twain's notebook that reads, "Witnessed post mortem of my uncle through the keyhole" (116). Wecter notes that the date connected to the event matches the date of the death of Twain's father: "Since 1847 marked the date of no uncle's demise, but was the never-to-be-forgotten year of his father's death, the true identification is easily made" (116). Wecter also claims that "Orion's lost autobiography told the story in detail, because in those pages William Dean Howells read it" (116). After reading Orion's account, Howells wrote to Twain: "But the writer's soul is laid too bare; it is shocking, . . . and if you print it anywhere, I hope you won't let your love of the naked truth prevent you from striking out some of the most intimate pages. Don't let any one else even see those passages about the autopsy" (Wecter 116). Obviously, Twain's life was filled with traumatic episodes that are incorporated into his stories.

However, the question of where Mark Twain may have found his anecdotes is not nearly as interesting as how he chooses to tell them. After all, he is a storyteller, one who may have exaggerated his childhood for the sake of a good tale. Regardless of where he finds ideas for his yarns, he takes traumatic episodes and turns them into a story, incorporating both humor and tragedy. This combination of comedy and horror creates a shock effect for the reader, forcing examples of the negativity of humans to become more vivid and memorable. As a result, the elements of trauma and violence are unexpected but are not randomly placed in his fiction. Nor can these elements be dismissed as "coarse fun," although critics have attempted to do so. Twain does not use violence for violence's sake; he uses it deliberately and with a purpose. Because

the violent scenes are so graphic and realistic, they reach out and grab readers, drawing them further into the plot, symbols, and themes of the literature.

One violent image that Twain uses repeatedly deals with fire. As a child, he gave a drunken tramp matches, and this man accidentally set his jail cell on fire. Young Samuel Clemens watched, helplessly, as the transient was burned alive. Twain reports that this “got into his dreams. . . . [I]t was his conscience that made such things torture him” (qtd. in Paine 19). If one can believe him, this image has moved from his dreams to his novels. As a result, it is difficult to identify a single way in which he uses fire; he uses fire in a myriad of ways which undergo a constant metamorphosis. Fire is used to represent feelings of guilt. It also is used to reveal human suffering even as it symbolizes negative personality traits of humans, traits that often cause human suffering: mob mentality, anger, hatred, arrogance, pride, ambition, power, and fear. Fire provides a reversal or change; frequently fire offers a new opportunity for growth or observation. Fire is also used to symbolize two apparently opposite ideas; fire symbolizes superstition and religion as well as the forces of technology and change. Finally, fire is used to destroy and to cleanse; the flames destroy in order to create something new. Thus, an interesting contrast is created; fire is both destructive and beneficial.

In many of Twain’s early works, fire imagery is present but is used subtly; it does not overwhelm the reader. For example, much of the fire imagery is a simple hellish reference: Huckleberry Finn’s “All right, then, I’ll go to hell” is an example of a simple quote that speaks volumes (Twain, Huck 271). With that one word, hell, Twain does several things. First, Hell demonstrates how religion has been transformed into a



myth or superstition; the threat of Hell has been used to frighten young children into obeying or conforming. The passage also fully demonstrates how Huck breaks free from the holds of society and does the right thing; he does not conform. Second, Twain reveals the depth of Huck's feelings for his friend; Huckleberry Finn is willing to risk eternal fiery damnation in order to save Jim. Finally, this passage also symbolizes Huck's metamorphosis into a caring, non-racist individual who does not follow society by embracing racism. Since hell is frequently connected to ideas of evil, to Satan, and to images of fire, hell can be linked to Twain's use of fire. As a result, in one passage, the fires of hell symbolize the superstitious use of religion, reveal the depth of Huck's compassion, and demonstrate a metamorphosis or change in character.

Early works also demonstrate how Twain uses fire imagery to represent vile traits of human beings: the evils of mob mentality, man's cruelty to other humans, the evil nature of an individual, or negative personality traits. Ironically, fire is also used to emphasize the suffering felt by human beings, suffering usually inflicted by other humans. For example, Roughing It describes a gunfighter, Slade, who "cuts off ears" of men who oppose him, kills several men, and, in one case of revenge, "set the house on fire and burned up the dead man, his widow, and three children" (109). As Mark Twain states through Huck Finn in The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, "Human beings can be awful cruel to one another" (290).

Fire is also used to represent guilty feelings. For instance, in The Adventures of Tom Sawyer (1876), Tom imagines that a terrible storm, complete with "blinding sheets of lightning," is God's judgment upon him: "He believed he had taxed the forbearance of the powers above the extremity of endurance, and that this was the



result" (144). Tom believes that he is the cause of the storm and fully expects to be punished through death and Hell. In his literature, Twain frequently equates feelings of guilt with storms and the fires of hell; thus, in The Adventures of Tom Sawyer, the fires of the storm help symbolically reveal Tom's feelings of guilt. Twain, a humorist, also frequently flavors his writing with comic references; most readers find Tom's imaginings amusing. Thus, he does not restrict his fire imagery to serious or traumatic stories. Tom's descriptions are memorable for the lighthearted, nostalgic reminder of childhood terrors, not for directly recalling true terror or violence. As a result, Twain incorporates fire into his humor, and the reader is not troubled by the nightmare; instead, the reader laughs.

Early works by Twain also develop the theme of fire as a type of metamorphosis. Fire is frequently used to destroy, to cleanse society, or to portray a reversal that leads to revelation. One such example occurs in Roughing It (1871). In this autobiographical account, Twain concocts a get-rich-quick scheme that involves building a ranch. However, Twain allows his campfire to burn out of control: "The ground was deeply carpeted with dry pine needles, and the fire touched them off as if they were gunpowder. It was wonderful to see with what fierce speed the tall sheet of flame traveled!" (Twain, Roughing 194). It consumes everything: "as far as the eye could reach the lofty mountain-fronts were webbed as it were with a tangled network of red lava streams" (194). This fire turns Twain and his party into "homeless wanderers again, without any property" (195). By destroying Twain's property and reversing his position, the fire reveals a lesson that Twain describes but never learns: get-rich-quick schemes are not successful. Perhaps unknown to Twain, this passage

also reveals his predisposition for writing beautiful imagery: “Every feature of the spectacle was repeated in the glowing mirror of the lake! Both pictures were sublime, both were beautiful; but that in the lake had a bewildering richness about it that enchanted the eye and held it with the stronger fascination” (195). Ironically, he does not focus upon the horror of his loss; instead, he notes the beautiful imagery.

Mark Twain uses fire imagery in almost all of his works: fire imagery appears in his novels, his short stories, and his non-fiction. Two books stand out in significance when discussing fire imagery, however. The first, Life on the Mississippi (1883), is an example of Twain’s non-fiction. Life on the Mississippi reveals the possible source of his fascination with fire. It also marks the point in which fire imagery first increases in magnitude in Twain’s literature, developing fire as a literary tool.

The second work of significance is A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court (1889). Published a mere six years after Life on the Mississippi, it provides a sharp contrast to the light-hearted nature of the travel story. According to Bernard L. Stein in his introduction to A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court, the novel begins with a humorous tone, but “during the nearly five years Mark Twain spent writing his book, its lighthearted tone shifted dramatically” (xv). His shift in tone corresponds to a shift in his own attitude; while writing A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court, Twain makes note of the increasing bitterness and pessimism in his writing. Corresponding to this pessimistic tone, the usage of fire increases significantly: in A Connecticut Yankee, fire is used brutally, with little comic relief. Fire is used symbolically to provide metamorphosis and to help Twain portray the

theme of “human tyranny and cruelty,” revealing the negative nature of humans and the suffering of mankind (Stein xv).

Fire imagery continues to be strongly utilized in Twain’s literature written after A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court. For example, a collection of short stories published after Mark Twain’s death also contains a significant amount of fire imagery. Letters from the Earth: Uncensored Writings by Mark Twain (1938) was written during Twain’s later stage, after his bitterness that began in A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court was complete. This collection was so scandalous that, according to Henry Nash Smith in his preface, Clara Clemens so “objected to the publication of certain parts of it on the ground that they presented a distorted view of her father’s ideas and attitudes [that] the project was dropped” (vii). This collection, needless to say, presents a dark side of Mark Twain, a side that is surrounded by fire.

However, Twain seems to begin to develop his fire imagery in Life on the Mississippi and A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court. In addition, prior to the publication of Life on the Mississippi, one has to search to find examples of fire imagery. After the publication of Life on the Mississippi, fire imagery explodes from the pages of Twain’s works. This absence of fire imagery seems to indicate that Life on the Mississippi and A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court represent several turning points in Twain’s writing career. In particular, Life on the Mississippi describes Twain’s transformation from a naive boy with romantic notions to a realistic steamboat pilot who sacrifices the recognition of beauty for wariness and alertness. A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court also demonstrates a change in Twain’s

writing, an inclination toward negativity. Both of these novels, and these transformations, are marked by fire.

## Chapter One:

## “Transformed by Smoke”:

Fire Imagery in Life on the Mississippi

Fire follows Mark Twain throughout his life. As a child, he witnesses a tragic fire that helps destroy his boyhood innocence. As a young adult, fire consumes the steamboat that helped bring him closer to his river, killing his younger brother for whom Twain feels responsible. As an adult steamboat pilot, fires threaten Twain's existence daily. In Life on the Mississippi, Twain turns to the river to find peace from life and his past. Fire, ironically, follows Twain to the water and to his writing, blazing a bridge between his past and present and between his reality and his fiction. Because Life on the Mississippi is a compilation of anecdotes from Twain's life, the travel narrative uses fire in two distinct ways. First, fire is used to describe actual events that occurred. Second, fire is used as a literary device to represent guilt or fear, to indicate change, to illuminate negative and positive personality traits, to reveal human suffering, to cleanse or destroy, and to provide humor, both tragic and exaggerated.

Good writers draw upon their own life experiences in order to create memorable, realistic stories. Twain is no exception. Having experienced numerous fires in his actual life, he then incorporates those fires into his stories. As a result, his fiction contains an amazing amount of fire imagery. His nonfiction also contains varied accounts of real fires as well as fictionalized and symbolic ones. Life on the Mississippi, an autobiographical travel novel, reveals one possible source of Twain's fire imagery, a tragic fire equated to feelings of guilt.

Fire, guilt, human suffering, and nightmares--these four elements are combined in the narrative that describes the death of the drunken tramp, the primary fire that is revealed in Life on the Mississippi. Even though examining this aspect of Twain's fire imagery borders on a biographical approach, the details of the tramp's death cannot be ignored. Life on the Mississippi, an autobiographical account, places extreme emphasis upon this tragedy that emotionally scarred the author. Accordingly, the depiction accentuates emotions of guilt and fear.

Twain begins his tragedy by explaining that, as a child, he gives a drunken tramp matches. This transient, identified as Dennis McDermid in the January 27, 1853, edition of Hannibal's newspaper The Journal, is arrested and accidentally sets his jail cell on fire. The entire town, including young Samuel Clemens, goes to the jail and watches as Mr. McDermid is burned alive:

At two in the morning, the church bells rang for fire, and everybody turned out, of course--I with the rest. The tramp had used his matches disastrously: he had set his straw bed on fire, and the oaken sheathing of the room had caught. When I reached the ground, two hundred men, women, and children stood massed together, transfixed with horror, and staring at the grated windows of the jail. Behind the iron bars, and tugging frantically at them, and screaming for help, stood the tramp; he seemed like a black object set against a sun, so white and intense was the light at his back. The marshal could not be found, and he had the only key. A battering-ram was quickly

improvised, and the thunder of its blows upon the door had so encouraging a sound that the spectators broke into wild cheering, and believed the merciful battle won. But it was not so. The timbers were too strong; they did not yield. It was said that the man's death-grip still held fast to the bars after he was dead; and that in this position the fires wrapped him about and consumed him. As to this, I do not know. What was seen after I recognized the face that was pleading through the bars was seen by others, not by me. (Twain, Life 388)

Twain describes this fire with few, but critical details, using a detached style. Significantly, the fire receives the initial but limited focus. The only actual description of the fire states that "he seemed like a black object set against a sun, so white and intense was the light at his back . . . the fires wrapped him about and consumed him" (388). At first, the image of the fire overwhelms all other images. Then the fire emphasizes the anguish of the tramp; the image of the fire is forced into the background. The fire illuminates the tramp, who is simply described as "tugging frantically . . . screaming for help" (388). Even though he gives few details, this imagery is complete and vivid, reflecting the horror and fear that must have been felt by Twain as he recognized human suffering and felt the blow of guilt upon recognizing the man. This scene has made an impact on the young Sam's mind, an impact he acknowledges in subsequent writings.

The simple and direct, yet vivid description of the tramp's death reflects the guilt that Twain feels. One common reaction exhibited by people who feel strong

feelings of guilt is to withhold information; the truth is revealed only when the individual's conscience can bear no more or when the individual learns to cope with the guilty feelings. Lenore Terr notes that guilt is "private" (113). She indicates that usually extreme guilt is only revealed when the trauma becomes too much for the soul to bear or enough time has elapsed and the person can deal with the trauma. She also states that extreme trauma or guilt will strongly affect a person's dreams (Terr 113).

Twain is no exception. His guilt begins to haunt his dreams: "I saw that face, so situated, every night for a long time afterward; and I believed myself as guilty of the man's death as if I had given him the matches purposely that he might burn himself up with them" (Twain, Life 388). He dreams of the doomed tramp each and every night. Note that in his dream, the fire has faded into the background; the suffering of the tramp is the repeated dream. This repeated dream matches what Twain claims he saw. He recognizes the face, sees the anguish, and then blocks out all other occurrences. Terr writes that repeated dreams are extremely common after an individual has experienced "psychic trauma" (210). She also explains that the "simplest post-traumatic nightmare, the exact repetition, replays blow-by-blow part of the traumatic event or an idea from the event" (210). At first, Twain experiences this type of trauma-induced dream, the repetition. He replays a part of the trauma, the man's face, over each night for an extended period of time. The fire becomes symbolic of the man's sufferings and then is transformed into a symbol of Twain's guilty conscience. Fire reveals both suffering and guilt.

The guilt of the tramp's death is too much for Twain to bear alone. His subconscious feels the need for confession: "All this time I was blessedly forgetting



one thing--the fact that I was an inveterate talker in my sleep" (Twain, Life 388).

Twain begins to speak, first through his dreaming. Later he talks around the issue to his brother, pretending another boy committed his crime, in order to alleviate his feelings of guilt. He finds no relief; his brother states, "If the man was drunk, and the boy knew it, the boy murdered that man. This is certain" (390). Inadvertently, his brother compounds his feelings of guilt.

As the maxim indicates, confession is good for the soul. However, Twain's soul finds no comfort in his initial, unintentional confession. Because Twain discovers no relief from speaking to his brother, he confesses to his audience. He confesses by actually writing the story and admitting to his guilty feelings. Twain describes how fire, connected to the tramp's death, scorches his mind: "The happenings and the impressions of that time are burnt into my memory, and the study of them entertains me as much now as they themselves distressed me then. . . . For a boy of ten years, I was carrying a pretty weighty cargo" (Twain, Life 388). The weighty cargo is, deserved or not, a guilty conscience. Twain also uses a fire image, "burnt," to represent or reveal this tortured conscience or guilt (388).

Twain also symbolically confesses his feelings of guilt by using fire imagery throughout his literature; fire imagery fills his novels and is often connected to dreams and nightmares that reveal feelings of guilt. Bernard DeVoto, in his introduction to Mark Twain in Eruption (1940), notes that Twain was "under an imperative obligation, a psychological necessity, to deal with the catastrophes that had shattered him" (xx). DeVoto also claims that Twain could only deal with these catastrophes by "indirection, by forging it into the symbols of fiction" (xxi). Dixon Wecter, in Sam Clemens of

Hannibal, notices that “the horror of death by fire, which figures so often in his medieval fantasies and entered of course into his projected book on Southern lyncherdom,” is influenced by the death of the tramp and “re-enforced by steamboat tragedies” (257). Wecter also implies that fictionalizing these accounts allows Twain to make “confession” (257). From an adult perspective, Twain gains the courage to confess by rewriting the horror of his past in the hope of exorcising his demons.

Almost fifty years after DeVoto makes his observation, Lenore Terr describes a similar process of exorcising the demons of the past. Terr notes that numerous authors and artists engage in this type of exorcism, calling it “the post-traumatic play of writers” (259). Terr also indicates that this play, writing about the trauma, will continue and will even take new forms (212). Twain follows this pattern. The image of the tramp burning to death not only haunts Twain’s fiction, but appears in other autobiographical sketches by Twain. In Twain’s autobiography, for instance, he again tells the story:

The drunken tramp who was burned up in the village jail lay upon my conscience a hundred nights afterward and filled them with hideous dreams--dreams in which I saw his appealing face as I had seen it in the pathetic reality, pressed against the window bars, with the red hell glowing behind him--a face which seemed to say to me “If you had not given me the matches this would not have happened; you are responsible for my death.” I was not responsible for it, for I had meant him no harm but only good, when I let him have the

matches. . . . The tramp--who was to blame--suffered ten minutes;

I, who was not to blame, suffered three months. (Twain, Auto 41)

Again, Twain emphasizes the “appealing face,” “the red hell,” and his guilty conscience. And, it is easy to recognize that even though Twain claims that his suffering only lasted three months, he still is obsessed by the image of the tramp’s death. This obsession is revealed in Twain’s literature as he repeatedly utilizes the image of fire.

This passage also portrays one element of Twain’s fiction, tragic laughter. As Bernard DeVoto notes in his introduction to The Portable Mark Twain (1946), “the critic who for a moment forgets that Mark was a humorist is betrayed” (30). In this particular passage, Twain attempts to make light of his reality through the use of humor. By humorously limiting the tramp’s suffering to “ten minutes,” he attempts to convince himself that the tramp’s sufferings were minimal (Twain, Auto 41). The descriptions of the tramp’s death are horrifying, yet Twain incorporates comedy into the tragedy, creating a small smile through tears. Twain has attempted to undercut the tragedy with a comic statement. In this case, he misses his mark. The tragedy overwhelms his attempts at comic relief.

Even though Twain claims that he only suffered for three months, the tramp’s death is imprinted in Twain’s memory; accordingly, the image of fire disturbs the pages of Twain’s literature, both fiction and non-fiction. Terr explains that people who “review their own personal horrors. . . . feel ‘haunted’” (139). In other words, traumatic images like the fire will occur over and over again; traumatized individuals will find new representations of their trauma. This haunting is visible in Twain’s non-fiction; he finds numerous examples of fire to narrate. For example, he draws upon his

experiences with fire to describe a second traumatic fire, the explosion that kills his brother. "New life circumstances add" to the trauma (Terr 211); life revises Twain's guilty feelings and adds to his nightmares. Reality and fiction are interwoven, connecting the past, nightmares, and suffering. Fire is used to reveal these connections.

Prior to the steamboat explosion, Twain helps his brother Henry get a job on the *Pennsylvania*. He then gets into a physical confrontation with Mr. Brown, trying to protect Henry, and is temporarily put off the steamboat. Before he can rejoin the crew, the *Pennsylvania* actually explodes. Because reality has entered Twain's dreams and dreams have entered Twain's reality, he can describe the explosion, even though he is not actually present, in fiery detail: ". . . four of the eight boilers exploded with a thunderous crash, and the whole forward third of the boat was hoisted toward the sky! The main part of the mass, with the chimneys, dropped upon the boat again, a mountain of riddled and chaotic rubbish--and then, after a little, fire broke out" (Twain, *Life* 162). Twain uses fire to connect fiction to reality. Twain has taken an actual event, not witnessed by him, and recreated it on paper. He recalls memories of the tramp's death and suffering and uses these memories to reconstitute the fires that follow the explosion of the *Pennsylvania* and to portray the suffering of the dying individuals. These memories are then placed indirectly on paper, turning life into a fictional non-fiction, transforming what would have been a journalistic account into a moving, horrifying, and excellent narrative. Again Twain describes a traumatic episode and forsakes his customary humor, leaving stark, grim reality. Both the passage that describes the death of the tramp and the passage that details the steamboat explosion are told bluntly in a detached manner.

Possibly because Twain had such vivid nightmares when he was a child, he is able to describe the suffering caused by fire, suffering that he never actually sees, with horrible detail:

By this time the fire was beginning to threaten. Shrieks and groans filled the air. A great many persons had been scalded, a great many crippled; the explosion had driven an iron crowbar through one man's body--I think they said he was a priest. He did not die at once, and his sufferings were dreadful. A young French naval cadet, of fifteen, son of a French admiral, was fearfully scalded, but bore his tortures manfully. Both mates were badly scalded but they stood to their posts, nevertheless. (Twain, Life 163)

Note that Twain does not spend a great deal of space describing the actual fire.

Instead, he uses most of his words to describe the suffering of the human beings. Fire reveals this suffering, a pattern which is later repeated as Twain illustrates the death of a man trapped by fire:

By this time the fire was making fierce headway, and several persons who were imprisoned under the ruins were begging piteously for help. All efforts to conquer the fire proved fruitless; so the buckets were presently thrown aside and the officers fell-to with axes and tried to cut the prisoners out. A striker was one of the captives; he said he was not injured, but could not free himself; and when he saw that the fire was likely to drive away the workers, he begged that some one

would shoot him, and thus save him from the more dreadful death.

The fire did drive the axemen away, and they had to listen, helpless, to this poor fellow's supplications till the flames ended his miseries.

(163)

Twain has indirectly witnessed the sufferings of both the striker and the rivermen.

These two descriptions echo the death of the tramp.

The descriptions of the explosion begin to show how Twain takes a real fire and transforms it into a fictional device. First, fire based on reality enters Twain's dreams. According to Twain, images that get into his dreams become more real to him than ordinary events. Twain states that fire has gotten into his nightmares; he describes, for example, how he dreamed of the burning tramp each and every night for an extended period of time. After fiery reality has become a dream, he fictionalizes the account. This stage is revealed in the description of the steamboat explosion. He describes the event as if he were present even though the reader knows that he is not. As demonstrated by the steamboat explosion, fire has moved into Twain's fiction, revealing both guilt and human suffering. Finally, the fictional fire is transformed into a literary device that can symbolize or represent a multitude of ideas. In a complex manner, Twain uses fire as a dual literary technique. Fire can represent both positive and negative ideas; at times this dual nature occurs simultaneously.

For instance, Twain uses fire, a familiar medium that causes human anguish, to reveal heroism. As Twain thought about ideas for turning his article, "Old Times on the Mississippi," into a novel, Life on the Mississippi, he first considered "cases of pilots burning at the wheel" (Kruse 17). "Episodes in Pilot Life," chapter XLIX,

contains numerous accounts of these heroes who choose death through fire. Because Twain has previously described the human suffering that is connected to a fiery death, the following brief description of a pilot's death also implies extreme suffering. However, the suffering is not emphasized; instead, it is the heroism of this unselfish pilot that is accentuated:

One of the pilots whom I had known when I was on the river had died a very honorable death. His boat caught fire, and he remained at the wheel until he got her safe to land. Then he went out over the breast-board with his clothing in flames, and was the last person to get to shore. He died from his injuries in the course of two or three hours, and his was the only life lost. (Twain, Life 345)

Fire follows Twain throughout his life; his childhood infernos have reappeared in Twain's adult world and pose a new daily threat. In a possible attempt to cope with this threat, Twain glamorizes the courage of the pilots who bravely face death by fire. Twain removes humor from his description, emphasizing the reality, the tragedy, and the heroism. As a result, the deaths of the pilots become romanticized; fire provides the medium for these pilots to make a mark of heroism upon the world. This courage could have been portrayed through other mediums. However, Twain deliberately chooses fire; since his past has given him the opportunity to observe the horror of death by fire, Twain knows that such a death is agonizing and that only the most brave could possibly face this threat. In the examples of burning pilots, fire is still destructive, but their sacrifices become heroic occasions for both mourning and celebration of the human race. Thus, as it destroys, fire reveals positive human qualities: courage and

sacrifice. The suffering of these pilots, in contrast to the suffering of the tramp, has not been in vain; lives have been saved.

In the examples of the burning pilots, fire operates on several literary levels. First, fire is used for revelation; fire reveals true heroism as the pilots sacrifice their lives so that others may live. Second, fire indicates human suffering; although Twain does not emphasize this aspect of fire with his words, the reader recognizes the pain that is caused by burning. Finally, he subtly notes the justified fears of steamboat pilots; accordingly, fire accentuates those fears. Thus, he acknowledges the dual nature of fire. Real fire can work for good or bad; Twain's literary fires represent both positive and negative ideas.

Even though Twain has glamorized the courage of the pilots who face fire, their sufferings still trouble Twain. Twain uses his writing, including Life on the Mississippi, as a medium to face his conflicting emotions about fire and his past. Bernard DeVoto, in his introduction to Mark Twain in Eruption, indicates that many of the flaws connected to Twain's non-fiction are due to Twain's fear of his past and the nightmares connected to the past:

When he invoked Hannibal [the memory of his childhood] he found there not only the idyll of boyhood but anxiety, violence, supernatural horror, and an uncrystallized but enveloping dread. Much of his fiction, most of his masterpiece [Huckleberry Finn], flows from that phantasy-bound anxiety." (xviii)

Bernard DeVoto believes that Twain writes in order to "examine and understand that dread"(Eruption xviii). DeVoto also believes that "the impulse was arrested short of



genuine self-revelation because the dread was so central in him that he could approach it only symbolically, by way of fiction” (xviii). Lenore Terr explains this connection. She writes that occasionally authors will indirectly write about a traumatic episode, sometimes putting a positive spin on the trauma:

as the years go by, a repeated dream will take on enough deeply disguised symbolism, wish gratification, and modification with recent content that it no longer seems, at first glance, to be a repeated or a traumatic dream at all. Under careful scrutiny, however, such a deeply disguised dream will often reveal its origins as traumatic.

(Terr 212)

Twain is guilty of what Terr terms “camouflaged” writing (212). By repeatedly choosing fire as a literary technique and by incorporating positive examples of fire imagery, he attempts to mask the horror of his nightmare. The numerous depictions of steamboat pilots burning at the wheel demonstrate this concept. His masked writing is not limited to factual accounts, however. Twain connects fire to other events and fictionalizes his past; the line between fiction and fact becomes blurred by smoke.

A perfect example of the blurring of fact and fiction occurs when Twain writes about the deaths of childhood friends: “When I was a small boy, Lem Hackett was drowned--on a Sunday. He fell out of an empty flat-boat, where he was playing. Being loaded with sin, he went to the bottom like an anvil. He was the only boy in the village who slept that night” (Twain, *Life* 373). The night of Lem’s death, “There was a ferocious thunder-storm, . . . and it raged continuously until near dawn. . . . [A]t the briefest of intervals the inky blackness of the night vanished, the houses over the way

glared out white and blinding for a quivering instant” (375). Twain feels that this storm is judgment, that “I should be in the fire with Lem before the chill of the river had been fairly warmed out of him” (376). This story is told for humorous effect where he uses fire as a symbol for hell and damnation. However, he has again used fire to connect to guilt, fear, and human suffering. As a result, DeVoto says that Twain “laughs and, for the first time, American literature possesses tragic laughter” (America 268). Fire helps create the tragedy for Twain and then scorches it on the written page. Thus, fire is connected to one form of his humor, tragic laughter.

Twain uses fire to portray human tragedy while producing laughter in other semi-autobiographical accounts as well. He “produces laughter by exhibiting what [he] had seen and heard in the world of reality” (DeVoto, America 243). For example, in The Autobiography of Mark Twain, Twain recounts boyhood stories similar to those revealed in Life on the Mississippi:

With every glare of lightning I shriveled and shrank together in  
mortal terror, and in the interval of black darkness that followed  
I poured out my lamentings over my lost condition, and my  
supplications for just one more chance, with an energy and feeling  
and sincerity quite foreign to my nature. (Twain, Auto 69)

It is doubtful that a storm just happened to occur every time that young Samuel Clemens was feeling guilty about his soul or a notable person died. As Mark Twain himself claims, “I don’t believe all the details are right” (qtd. in Neider xiv). It is interesting to note, however, that Mark Twain chooses to ad-lib details that happen to be connected to fire imagery and guilt. Fiction and fact are intermingled and Twain

naturally uses fire, or things connected to fire, to represent a tormented conscience and the childhood fear of hell. In this passage, the fiery lightning glares are related to fire since fires are often the result of lightning strikes. Fire is utilized as a tool of revelation, creating tragic laughter even as it characterizes a young boy's suffering and guilt.

In contrast to the traumatic deaths of the pilot, the tramp, and the individuals on the *Pennsylvania*, the boyhood terrors revealed by Twain stand out for their humorous, nostalgic reminders of childhood; accordingly, fire is again used as a humorous device. The violence of the storms as well as the fears and guilt of the child are very real and traumatic. However, their inclusion does not detract from the humor of the passage. The humor used is not slapstick but the effect is similar; the violence and trauma fade into the background, leaving the humor. Readers laugh at this example of childhood terror and are possibly reminded of similar childhood fears.

Life on the Mississippi also contains many descriptions of violent or traumatic humor. For example, when Twain has an opportunity to attack his enemy, Mr. Brown, he "stuck to him and pounded him with my fists a considerable time. I do not know how long, the pleasure of it probably made it seem longer than it really was. . . ." (Twain, Life 158). Although not connected to fire, the passage demonstrates how quickly Twain can change the focus of a description from violence to humor. In this passage, the violence is not the emphasis even though he is describing a fight; instead, humor receives the most attention. Because the violence is cloaked in exaggerated humor, readers can relate to Twain's violent pleasure and laugh.

Life on the Mississippi uses humor and fire to draw attention to a major theme found in Twain's novels: "Human beings can be awful cruel to one another" (Twain, Huck 290). In his novels, fire imagery is frequently used to symbolize cruelty, negative human traits, fear, and guilt. It is also used to illuminate numerous examples of human suffering. Critics have lumped these ideas into a phrase coined by Twain which seems to sum up the negative actions of some human beings, "the damned human race" (Stein xvi). However, because Life on the Mississippi is primarily a humorous travel novel, it is not completely focused upon the horror of these themes. In Life on the Mississippi, the human race is not quite damned; it is just human and is prone to do negative things. Nonetheless, it does need a spanking. Symbolically, Twain accomplishes this whipping with fire, veiling his verbal thrashing with exaggeration and parody.

For example, fire is associated with people whom Twain dislikes, people who need a verbal lashing. For instance, as a young man, he had problems with one of his pilots, Mr. Brown. Mr. Brown is a "middle-aged, long, slim, bony, smooth-shaven, horse-faced, ignorant, stingy, malicious, snarling, fault-hunting, mote-magnifying tyrant" (Twain, Life 152). Mr. Brown loses his temper with young Samuel Clemens often. When he does, the change in his countenance is dramatic: "that long horse-face swung round upon me again--and then, what a change! It was as red as fire, and every muscle in it was working" (154). Foreshadowing Twain's later novels, in this instance, fire is associated with negative human emotions: anger, rage, and hatred. However, he cloaks his reaction to Brown with humor; he imagines that he "killed Brown in seventeen different ways--all of them new" (Twain, Life 156). As a result, the hatred

he feels for Brown is toned down to extreme dislike. Readers relate more easily to feelings of dislike; they laugh and recall similar emotions and experiences. The exaggerated violence does not upset the comedy.

Even though Twain associates Brown with fire, he recognizes that Brown does not see himself as obnoxious: “‘Dod dern’ was the nearest he ventured to the luxury of swearing, for he had been brought up with a wholesome respect for future fire and brimstone” (Twain, *Life* 156). Brown is afraid of the fires of hell, and watches his language, though not his attitude; only Twain seems to see the irony. In another example of real irony, fire does actually claim Brown. Brown is aboard the *Pennsylvania* when it explodes: “Brown, the pilot, and George, chief clerk, were never seen or heard of after the explosion” (162).

The mode of Brown’s death becomes more ironic because Twain also uses fire in his fiction to provide metamorphosis through a change or a cleansing. Brown represents negative human beings; Brown is killed due to a fire or explosion, symbolically cleansing the human race. While this specific connection could have been unintentional on Twain’s part, he does deliberately use fire to sweep away other examples of evil. For example, following a short tirade on the cost of funerals and how swindlers take advantage of humanity, he states that “the arguments are all on the side of cremation, none in favor of inhumation” (Twain, *Life* 308). With humor, he claims that cremation would solve, or cleanse, the exploitation of death that occurs when human vultures, or greedy profiteers, take the opportunity to turn a person’s grief into a money making scam. If people were cremated, undertakers could not play on a family’s grief in order to swindle them. Ironically, in this instance, fire would alleviate

people's sufferings, feelings of grief, and possibly guilt. However, he understands human nature and realizes that exploitation would soon occur again:

For the rich, cremation would answer as well as burial, for the ceremonies connected with it could be made as costly and ostentatious as a Hindoo suttee; for the poor cremation would be better than burial, because so cheap--so cheap until the poor got to imitating the rich, which they would do by and by. (308)

Ideally, since cremation, or the burning of the body, is cheaper than interment, the exploitation of grief will stop. However, he realizes that there is always another human, maybe an insurance agent, who is willing to commit the evils abandoned by another human being and to exploit human fears.

Twain proves his point when he describes an actual insurance agent who becomes an undertaker in order to make money:

It used to be rough times with me when you knew me--insurance-agency business, you know; mighty irregular. Big fire, all right--brisk trade for ten days while people scared; after that, dull policy-business till next fire. Town like this don't have fires often enough--a fellow strikes so many dull weeks in a row that he gets discouraged. (Twain, Life 309)

This insurance salesman-turned-undertaker does not care about the suffering of his fellow human beings, a suffering symbolized by fire; he cares about making money.

After describing his conversation with the undertaker, Twain claims that in "his joyful high spirits, he [the undertaker] did the exaggerating himself, if any has been

done. I have not enlarged on him” (Twain, Life 312). Supposedly, he has not exaggerated this man for a humorous effect; men like the undertaker actually exist. Twain decides that the only way to cleanse the world of the exploitation of death is fire: “With the above brief references to inhumation, let us leave the subject. As for me, I hope to be cremated” (Twain, Life 312). Ironically, and humorously, he associates his future with fire:

I made that remark [about cremation] to my pastor once, who said,  
with what he seemed to think was an impressive manner,--

“I wouldn’t worry about that, if I had your chances.” (Twain,  
Life 312)

He humorously chastises himself by implying that the fires of the crematory are not the only fires he will have to face. The reader, however, remembers Twain’s dreams of fire, his own personal hell, and notes the irony.

Both the undertaker and the insurance salesman are examples of negative human beings symbolically connected to fire. However, as demonstrated by the deaths of the tramp and the pilots, Life on the Mississippi also contains examples of tragedy that are devoid of humor. The seriousness and violence of these passages make the incidents stand out in the reader’s mind, emphasizing Mark Twain’s attempt to draw attention to the evils of society.

Twain’s most damning tirade against the human race occurs in chapter XL where he describes a “strange America, truly; and nearly inconceivable” (Twain, Life 290). He cites how a “fire brought out all the world to gape and admire, as at a show, whilst the gaudy firemen pow-wowed, and squirted with their painted, ineffectual

squirts, and the robbing of the premises went placidly on. . .” (290). Human beings are entertained by the fire and the firemen; they ignore the misery and destruction created by the fire. The amusement is associated with showy firemen who are ineffectual and preoccupied with their ten seconds of fame; the show is caused by a fire.

Fire also reveals other negative traits of humans: cowardice and greed. For instance, fires are set so that thieves may rob stores while police ignore the crimes:

. . . the robbing of the premises went placidly on, the mild ununiformed police being no bar nor hindrance; where nineteen fires out of sixty-four were set by incendiaries, with theft in view, and the merchants were at last obliged to organize and pay a private police of their own in order to stop this thing, all hope of effective help from the inane government having died out. . . . (Twain, Life 290)

Twain demonstrates both the lack of courage exhibited by ordinary men and the influence greed holds over corrupt men. Most men, being human, are intimidated by thugs and do nothing to stop wrongdoing. He states that “Personal courage is a rare quality . . . . [T]he average citizen is not brave, he is timid” (334). Once again, a fire image surrounds these negative human qualities. Fires bring out the greed of bad men. Fires also reveal the cowardice of ordinary man.

Twain even associates the men who commit these crimes with fire: they “smoke, they use gross language, they successfully defy the conductor when he tries to collect their fare” (Twain, Life 334). These men are smoking, inhaling the result of fire and blowing out smoke. The act of smoking is associated with coarse language and bullying, other corrupt qualities. He completes his thoughts by stating, “the average



Southern citizen is like the average Northern citizen--does not like to embroil himself with a ruffian" (Twain, Life 334). He is not only condemning the hoodlum; he is also condemning the average citizen who is afraid to get burned for a worthy cause.

As established by the courage and sacrifice of the burning pilots, fire does not always signal a negative effect, however. In another example of fire that is equated with positive human traits and to humor, Twain describes a Dean who earns the respect of a laughing audience:

He followed it quick and fast, with other telling things; warmed to his work and began to pour his words out, instead of dripping them; grew hotter and hotter, and fell to discharging lightnings and thunder, --and now the house began to break into applause, to which the speaker gave no heed, but went hammering straight on; unwound his black bandage and cast it away, still thundering; presently discarded the bob-tailed coat and flung it aside, firing up higher and higher all the time; finally flung the vest after the coat; and then for an untimed period stood there, like another Vesuvius, spouting smoke and flame, lava and ashes, raining pumicestone and cinders, shaking the moral earth with intellectual crash upon crash, explosion upon explosion, while the mad multitude stood upon their feet in a solid body, answering back with ceaseless hurricane of cheers, through a thrashing snow-storm of waving handkerchiefs. (Twain, Life 395)

In calling the speaker a Vesuvius, Twain gives new meaning to the phrases "on fire" and "fired up." Like a volcano, the speaker affects everyone around the spoken

eruption. The eruption does not signify a violent or negative event; instead, a humorous, non-traumatic story is created. However, not only does this fire represent a positive human being, it also demonstrates how fire is used to indicate change. This Vesuvius inspires the metamorphosis of the audience. The audience, after hearing the speaker, changes its collective mind. Thus, fire is also used to depict change.

Another change or metamorphosis described by Twain demonstrates how his romantic, boyhood notions about the river become more realistic. Again, fire helps signal this metamorphosis. In Life on the Mississippi, Twain describes a “new world under my vision” (104). This almost perfect, dreamy world by the river is made even more dreamlike and mysterious by smoke:

When they have finished grinding the cane, they form the refuse of the stalks (which they call bagasse) into great piles and set fire to them, though in other sugar countries the bagasse is used for fuel in the furnaces of the sugar mills. Now the piles of damp bagasse burn slowly, and smoke like Satan’s own kitchen. (Twain, Life 105)

This particular passage helps demonstrate the change in Mark Twain’s perceptions regarding the river; he is moving from a romantic view of the river to a realistic perspective. Fire symbolizes this change by making him realize that, as a pilot, he can no longer focus upon the beauty and romance of the river. Instead, he must focus upon the dangers and the uncertainties lurking beneath the waters:

Fill that whole region with an impenetrable gloom of smoke  
from a hundred miles of burning bagasse piles, when the river

is over the banks, and turn a steamboat loose along there at midnight and see how she will feel. And see how you will feel, too! You find yourself away out in the midst of a vague dim sea that is shoreless, that fades out and loses itself in the murky distances; for you cannot discern the thin river embankment, and you are always imagining you see a straggling tree when you don't. The plantations themselves are transformed by the smoke, and look like a part of the sea. All through your watch you are tortured with the exquisite misery of uncertainty. (Twain, Life 106)

While this passage does not signal a violent occurrence in Twain's life, it does indicate an internal conflict. Twain uses the words "tortured" and "exquisite misery of uncertainty," indicating an internal suffering. Torturous fire symbolizes this uncertainty. He does not see the beauty of the smoke and the sea; ironically, he sees the danger of uncertainty. Fire provides this catalyst, revealing a change in perception for him. At the same time, fire reveals his suffering as he experiences his own metamorphosis: fires help him recall his previous romantic notions and emphasize their loss.

Life on the Mississippi describes numerous losses and tragedies. Twain loses his innocence upon watching the tramp die. He loses his brother to the steamboat explosion. He loses numerous childhood friends and adult colleagues. And he loses his romantic notions regarding life and the river. The descriptions of the tragedies and losses, many of which are related to fire, detract from the humorous impressions left by the novel; the comic flow is interrupted. However, since the novel is supposedly a true

account, an autobiography, readers can admire Twain for laughing in the face of adversity and loss.

Life on the Mississippi, a light-hearted, autobiographical, travel novel, is an important study in order to fully understand how Twain uses fire to reveal numerous ideas connected to human suffering, fear, guilt, and the dark side of human nature. It also develops positive ideas of fire: fire is connected to change and to humor. By understanding how Twain uses fire to portray real events and how he turns factual fires into literary devices, one can more fully appreciate the dual nature of fire that appears in his fiction. The images of the tormented tramp, the terrible steamboat explosion, and the deaths of heroic pilots haunt Twain's later fiction, creating complex images of fire that are used in diverse ways. Life on the Mississippi is a clear indication that fire affects Twain. In Life on the Mississippi, Twain attempts to explore these demons from the past that then proceed to haunt his fiction. Accordingly, embers of Life on the Mississippi burn in A Connecticut Yankee. In A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court, the verbal thrashings of the human race used in Life on the Mississippi increase in magnitude and become verbal castigations. Although still quite humorous, A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court takes a sharp dive from treating the damned human race lightly. However, critics seem to resent the combination of tragedy and laughter in Twain's later fiction; according to the critics, the tragedy and violence begin to detract from the humor. Finally, Twain uses fire in a more complex manner in A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court, emphasizing the dual nature of fire as it works for both good and evil.

## Chapter Two:

## A "Serene Volcano":

Fire Imagery in A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court

The embers that smolder in Life on the Mississippi become a holocaust in A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court. In this novel, Mark Twain incorporates his familiarity with fire into his fictional story of an accidental time traveler. Bernard DeVoto, in his introduction to Mark Twain in Eruption (1940), notes that when Twain "wrote fiction, he was impelled to write about the society in which his boyhood had been spent, and to write it out of the phantasies, the ecstasy, and the apprehension. . . ." (xvii). In A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court (1889), Twain has drawn upon his real experiences with fire to create numerous, realistic fires in his fiction. In this novel, fire is used primarily to reveal human suffering, to portray negative human traits, to destroy or cleanse, to provide foreshadowing, and to symbolize superstition, technology, pride, ambition, power and arrogance. It also provides an avenue for change, both good and bad.

One can see that fire imagery has increased in magnitude and is much more brutal in A Connecticut Yankee, written only six years after Life on the Mississippi. The light-hearted, humorous anecdotes related to fire that are found in Life on the Mississippi have practically dwindled away in A Connecticut Yankee. On the other hand, the connections between the negative side of human nature and fire blaze more furiously in the later book. In addition, Twain uses fire in a complex manner, creating a dual effect for his fire imagery. Themes introduced in Life on the Mississippi develop complex variations. Fire destroys even as it is used to cleanse society of various evils

and is utilized to provide a catalyst for growth and observation. Fire reveals human suffering even as it represents the people and mobs who promote the anguish. Fire also symbolizes a variety of ideas and institutions: superstition, technology, pride, ambition, power, and arrogance. A complex writer, Twain does not let the negativity of his past real fires control him; he uses fire in a complicated manner. His past traumatic experiences with fire metamorphosize into new, complex forms.

In comparison to Life on the Mississippi, the fire imagery of A Connecticut Yankee is much more damning. Twain no longer portrays autobiographical tragedies connected to fire; instead, his fires symbolically reveal the evil of mankind, provide a catalyst for growth and observation, and cleanse the land of evil. Although both novels contain much humor, the humor found in A Connecticut Yankee is much darker, and his purpose is not merely to create laughter; as Allison R. Ensor notes, Twain intends to write a “sharp satire which would destroy whatever vestiges of the power of the monarchy and of the established church were left in his century” (x). By the time he had completed his tale, the despair of his own financial situation and the destruction of his dreams had moved from Twain’s soul to the pages of his novel; as a result, the novel introduces “violence and despair of a kind which contrasts radically with the happier endings of the earlier Mark Twain novels” (Ensor x). Accordingly, fire images, symbols of human despair and suffering formed when Twain watched the tramp burn to death, fill the novel. Many of the catastrophic fires in A Connecticut Yankee are somehow connected to human despair and suffering. Many of the images are also violent. Few of these violent images are funny.

The violence and despair that show up on the page are a common complaint of early critics as they reviewed A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court. Of course, the British critics are highly indignant that an American should be belittling their Arthurian legends and British society. But even American critics seem to feel betrayed by Twain's new style: one critic from Speaker even states that "We hope--we may even believe--that we have seen the artist at his worst; we certainly have not seen the author at his best" ("Didactic" 159). Twain's humor in A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court is darker and much more satiric than earlier novels. The critics do not quite know how to respond to his biting satire. In addition, A Connecticut Yankee contains much more graphic violence than his previous stories and it is much more condemning of the human race. The critics do not seem to be ready for this new Twain. In contrast to Life on the Mississippi, the violence seems to distract readers from the humorous impact of the novel.

As stated, fire plays a key role in the development of Twain's new writing style and is used to a greater impact than in previous Twain works. A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court begins when the unnamed narrator of the story meets the second narrator, Hank Morgan. Hank reveals that he was involved in a fight and had been knocked unconscious. After awakening, Hank sees a knight in shining armor who looks like he stepped "fresh out of a picture book" (Twain, Yankee 5). Hank Morgan thinks that he is dreaming and expects to awaken any moment. When he awakens in the dungeon, he states, "Well, what an astonishing dream I've had! I reckon I've waked only just in time to keep from being hanged or drowned or burned, or something . . . . I'll nap again till the whistle blows, and then I'll go down to the arms-factory

and have it out with Hercules” (Twain, Yankee 36). One of Hank’s first fears is his belief that he is having a nightmare involving death by fire.

The nightmare enters Hank’s reality when he understands that he is not waking up from this supposed bad dream. Clarence tells Hank, “Oh, la, indeed! and is it a dream that you’re to be burned tomorrow? Ho-ho--answer me that!” (Twain, Yankee 37). Because Twain has experienced fire and dreams at their worst, he knows how intimidating they can be. Perhaps recalling the dreams that haunted him after the tramp was burned alive, Twain has Hank Morgan reflect on the seriousness of his situation:

The shock that went through me was distressing. I now began to reason that my situation was in the last degree serious, dream or not dream; for I knew by past experience of the life-like intensity of dreams, that to be burned to death, even in a dream, would be very far from being a jest, and was a thing to be avoided, by any means, fair or foul, that I could contrive. (Twain, Yankee 37)

Because of Twain’s own experiences with hellish nightmares, he knows that death by fire, even in a dream, is to be avoided at all cost.

Thus, by introducing fire in a dream, he begins to develop one of his themes for A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court. According to Bernard L. Stein, in his introduction to A Connecticut Yankee, the novel becomes a “vehicle for Mark Twain’s growing bitterness against ‘the damned human race,’ and sometimes a savage satire that could only have been bettered (he said) by ‘a pen warmed-up in hell’” (xvi). Repeating a pattern demonstrated in Life on the Mississippi, he uses fire to portray the negative side of human nature. According to James D. Williams, Twain’s purpose in



writing A Connecticut Yankee “was to ‘get at’ the Englishmen by satirizing ‘the shams, laws, and customs of today under the pretense of dealing with the England of the sixth century’” (361). He gets at them, and at other human beings, by razing Camelot, the beginning of modern England, with fire. The initial fire serves as a wake-up-call for Hank; it instills fear while introducing Hank to the unfairness of the law and the power of superstition.

The passage is also an early indication of Hank’s arrogance, an arrogance associated with fire which will eventually lead to his downfall. Hank is saved by tricking the populace into believing that he controls the sun. He calls the natural occurrence “my eclipse,” as if he actually created or owned the natural phenomenon (Twain, Yankee 47). This arrogance continues as Hank assumes that he knows best for the populace and, accordingly, attempts to cleanse society of superstition. Ironically, Twain uses fire to represent the illusion of Hank’s power even as it is used in an attempt to cleanse society of superstition, another illusion. Thus, fire operates on several symbolic levels. It symbolizes superstition, control, power, and arrogance. At the same time, it is used to cleanse society of the very traits it symbolizes.

Because Hank narrowly escapes being “burned alive,” he develops a burning desire to cleanse or change the society (Twain, Yankee 41). In Kenneth Lynn’s view, Hank becomes “Huck with a vengeance. The gentle boy who was so ashamed of the human race that he seceded from society has grown into an aggressive adult who wishes not to escape from a fallen Eden, but rather to uplift it” (Lynn 384). Twain uses fire to show the depths of human cruelty by describing what James D. Williams calls “outrageous scenes of brutal oppression” (362). Hank seeks to correct the oppressive

British society, a society that idealizes class, artificially empowers religion, and enforces rigid laws, by enforcing his own power, a power created through fire. Hank hopes to end the cruelty exhibited by humans toward other humans, oppression revealed by fire, by using his technology, which is also ironically connected to fire.

Hank uses fire and superstition to complete his cleansing, which begins with Merlin, “the mighty liar and magician” (Twain, Yankee 25). Merlin is a threat to Hank because he holds power in both the aristocratic and lower societies, a power created almost entirely through superstition and trickery. In order to gain more power, and to undermine Merlin’s authority, Hank destroys Merlin’s tower:

You wanted to burn me alive when I had not done you any harm,  
and latterly you have been trying to injure my professional reputation.  
Therefore I am going to call down fire and blow up your tower; but it  
is only fair to give you a chance; now if you think you can break my  
enchancements and ward off the fires, step to the bat, it’s your innings.

(58)

Hank intends to destroy Merlin’s tower with a combination of new technology and old fashioned fire. Hank also claims that he has the power to control or “call down” fire, even though, like Merlin, Hank is resorting to trickery (58). Right or wrong, Hank intends to cleanse the world of evil as he sees it. Hank has problems with much of Camelot’s society; Merlin represents the controlling power held by superstition, magic, and ignorance.

Hank, having surrounded the tower with modern explosives, then waits for the right opportunity. When the “lightning began to wink fitfully,” he knows that his

opportunity has knocked (Twain, Yankee 58). He destroys the tower and increases his power:

I made about three passes in the air, and then there was an awful crash and that old tower leaped into the sky in chunks along with a vast volcanic fountain of fire that turned night to noonday and showed a thousand acres of human beings groveling on the ground in a general collapse of consternation. Well, it rained mortar and masonry the rest of the week. This was the report; but I reckon they added on a couple of days. (59)

This fire destroys Hank's competition: "Merlin's stock was flat. The king wanted to stop his wages; he even wanted to banish him, but I interfered. I said he would be useful to work the weather, and attend to small matters like that. . . "(59). The destruction of Merlin's reputation gives Hank a reputation and the chance to create his utopia. Hank views superstition as evil but, ironically, he tries to break the power of superstition by using superstition. He feeds himself into Merlin's place, using fire to create superstition that is then used to control others. As a result, fire and superstition are dually connected. Fire is used to cleanse superstition even as it fuels another illusion, Hank's power and technology.

Hank, physically weaker than many of the knights of Camelot, also uses fire to control the people of medieval England. By controlling the common people, Hank can then work to change society. For example, when he smokes, the people believe that he is "one of those fire-belching dragons they had heard so much about from knights and other professional liars" (Twain, Yankee 119). He uses the fear of the people to his

advantage, explaining that his enchantment would “work harm to none but my enemies” (119). This fear greatly aids him as numerous would-be enemies want to “yield” to him (123). The easy conquests, of course, make his goal of creating a perfect society a bit easier; his enemies are afraid to confront him. Thus, again, fire is ironically helping him cleanse the society. Even though Hank is using fire to create superstition in order to achieve his utopia, he feels that his ultimate end will justify the means. Again, fire is used to create a mythology that is then used to meet one of his misguided goals, eliminating the power of superstition and religion.

However, by using his own personal fires to gain power, Hank is being hypocritical by contributing to the superstitions of the people, something he is supposedly attempting to eliminate. He does not see his own hypocrisy; he is substituting the superstition of magic and legends for the superstition of technology and himself. In fact, because he does not reveal to the people that he is using technology, he is only adding to their superstition of magic.

Even though Hank becomes obsessed with obtaining power, he does attempt to use his acquired power to change society. One example of the oppression that Hank wishes to change occurs when Twain shows how the payment of debts are collected by the wealthy:

a settlement of that hoary debt in the proportion of half a drop  
of blood for each hogshead of it that had been pressed by slow  
tortures out of that people in the weary stretch of ten centuries  
of wrong and shame and misery, the like of which was not to be

mated but in hell. (Twain, Yankee 111)

The implied metaphor used by Twain equates suffering with fire imagery, hell. He also compares the poverty of the freemen to “life-long death from hunger, cold, insult, cruelty and heart-break. . .” (112). Even though fire imagery is not specifically used in this quote, he is drawing attention to the life-long burden of suffering. The emphasis of prolonged suffering becomes important when he asks, “what is swift death by lightning, compared with death by slow fire at the stake?” (112). The metaphor describes two deaths, both linked to fire. Although both deaths are horrible, the slow death by fire, the death caused by suffering inflicted by callous people in power, is much worse. Twain is also implying that, because the nobles do nothing to help the welfare of their fellow human beings, they are just as evil as the person who “wrought murder in hot passion” (111). The only difference is that the nobles allow murder in “heartless cold blood” (111). The nobles are not moved by the suffering that they either cause or see; they go to bed at night with a clear conscience, not acknowledging the slow fiery deaths that they are causing. The author has portrayed both inhumane indifference and evil with three fire images: hell, lightning, and fire at the stake.

Twain uses fire to symbolize the evil of Morgan Le Fay, who helps portray mankind’s indifference to the suffering of others. Morgan Le Fay is beautiful but evil: “black thoughts had failed to make her expression repulsive, age had failed to wrinkle her satin skin or mar its bloomy freshness” (Twain, Yankee 143). Morgan Le Fay is symbolic of the humans who are not merely heartless and cold, but who are also cruel; she enjoys the suffering that she inflicts upon others. When the “muffled shriek--with an expression of agony about it that made my [Hank’s] flesh crawl” reaches Morgan’s

ear, she “stopped, and her eyes lighted with pleasure; she tilted her graceful head as a bird does when it listens” (153). The suffering of humans pleases her. Because Morgan Le Fay’s reputation has preceded her, Hank watches for signs of evil:

I knew Mrs. Le Fay by reputation, and was not expecting anything pleasant. . . . All her ways were wicked, all her instincts devilish.

She was loaded to the eye-lids with cold malice. All her history was black with crime; and among her crimes murder was common. I was most curious to see her; as curious as I could have been to see Satan.

(142)

In his description, Twain quickly links Morgan’s evil to the fires of hell; Hank connects Morgan Le Fay with Satan, an evil being who is a master of fire.

In his depictions of Morgan Le Fay, Twain continues to link his symbol of human evil, Morgan, directly to fire. For example, Twain has Hank call Morgan Le Fay “a silky smooth hellion” (Twain, Yankee 153). He also compares both rulers, the king and Queen Le Fay, to volcanoes. Before Hank frees the prisoners from Morgan’s dungeons, he considers asking permission from her husband. He quickly realizes that the king has no power: “he was but an extinct volcano; he had been active in his time, but his fire was out, this good while, he was only a stately ash-pile, now: gentle enough, and kindly enough for my purpose, without doubt, but not usable” (164).

With this fire image, Twain implies that the king had been guilty of committing crimes against humanity when he was in his prime, but now has lost his power and his force. His evil fire has either burned out and become ashes or has been consumed by

Morgan's stronger fire. Hank is also upset because he can't harness and use the king's power for his own purposes; the king is only an "ash-pile," not usable (164).

On the other hand, Morgan Le Fay "was the only power there" (Twain, Yankee 164). Morgan still enjoys her crimes against humanity. In contrast to the king's extinguished volcano, Hank compares Morgan to an active volcano: "And she was a Vesuvius. As a favor, she might consent to warm a flock of sparrows for you, but then she might take that very opportunity to turn herself loose and bury a city" (164). Although Morgan does not literally bury cities, she does bury people in her dungeons. One man has been buried for so long, his crime can no longer be remembered. As an active volcano, Morgan Le Fay becomes too dangerous, volatile, and unpredictable to manage or harness. Hank does not even try to utilize her power; instead, he attempts to restrict it by freeing her prisoners.

Even though Morgan Le Fay's power is limited by Hank, Morgan Le Fay can, and does literally erupt, spewing fire. After the grandmother of a boy that Morgan murdered curses her, Morgan orders: "Lay hands on her! to the stake with her!" (Twain, Yankee 164). As previously noted, Morgan is linked to the fires of hell and once imprisoned a man for saying that "she had red hair" (169). Like volcanic fire, Morgan Le Fay is hot-headed, destructive, and uncontrollable. Hank will not use her power; instead, he plans to "hang her . . . someday, if I lived" (163).

However, because of Hank's misguided goals, the things that he attempts to do for the sake of utopia are often corrupted, placing him on Morgan Le Fay's level. Like Morgan Le Fay, Hank's reputation begins to precede him. When Morgan Le Fay would have thrown Sandy and Hank in the dungeon, Sandy stops them: "God's

wownds, dost thou covet destruction, thou maniac? It is The Boss!” (145). The effect of these words “was electrical. It cleared her countenance, and brought back her smiles, and all her persuasive graces and blandishments; but nevertheless she was not able to entirely cover up with them the fact that she was in a ghastly fright” (145). Like Morgan Le Fay, Hank inspires fear. He inspires this fearsome reputation through his command of fire and the mythology of his power.

Hank shares more than just a reputation with Morgan Le Fay. Hank and Morgan share a name. Hank’s last name is Morgan; the similarity between the two names could not have been an accident on Twain’s part. Both of these characters, Hank Morgan and Morgan Le Fay, are associated with fire. Morgan Le Fay, for example, is described as a “Vesuvius” (Twain, Yankee 164). Hank’s father is a “blacksmith,” an occupation that requires working over roaring fires (4). As stated earlier, blacksmiths also fan fires or make fires grow hotter. Hank is fanning superstition and is perpetrating a new evil, an evil connected to technology.

This technology that gives Hank the power of fire is, like Morgan, compared to a volcano:

Unsuspected by this dark land, I had the civilization of the nineteenth century booming under its very nose! It was fenced away from the public view, but there it was, a gigantic and unassailable fact--and to be heard from, yet, if I lived and had luck. There it was, as sure a fact, and as substantial a fact as any serene volcano, standing innocent with its smokeless summit in the blue sky and giving no sign of the rising



hell in its bowels. (Twain, Yankee 82)

At first glance, the volcano seems to be inactive. However, the “rising hell in its bowels” implies that the volcano is close to eruption. Thus, the volcano has the same potential for destruction that is wielded by Morgan. As Kenneth S. Lynn notes, “Hank Morgan’s volcano image also implies a hellish instrument of destruction, to be used against all contemptible creatures who forcibly resist Utopia” (386). As a result, the passage does three things. First, it helps demonstrate the uselessness of technology. Hank has replaced religion with a faith in the superiority of progress; Twain shows that this faith is also inactive or futile. Second, the volcano image portrays potential danger. Like the power yielded by Merlin and the Church, technological progress also has the power to destroy and to cause harm. Finally, the volcanic image is another similarity between Morgan Le Fay and Hank. As Morgan unleashes her volcanic fire upon people who oppose her or anger her, Hank, likewise, intends to force the people of Camelot to accept his vision of the perfect society. This arrogance of Hank and the very force behind his actions seem to indicate that, like Morgan Le Fay, Hank’s fires will escalate, become unpredictable, and burn out of control. As a result, foreshadowing is created.

Obviously, the volcanic image used to describe Morgan Le Fay is a metaphor that helps reveal Morgan’s destructive power; Morgan is not literally a Vesuvius. Morgan Le Fay uses her metaphorical fire to cause harm. On the other hand, Hank utilizes actual fire to suit his purposes, using real fire to create an illusion of power that then gives him power over the people. Both Hank and Morgan use their fiery power to control the people of Camelot. Morgan abuses her power by destroying the lives of her

subjects. Hank abuses his power because he adds to superstition even though he claims that his intentions are to drive out superstition. Henry Nash Smith has noticed Hank's hypocrisy and notes that Hank's fiery technology serves no legitimate purpose; it does not add to the well being of the people of Camelot:

Despite Mark Twain's occasional efforts to give fictional substance to the Yankee's mechanical prowess, he actually performs no constructive feat except the restoration of the holy well; and it will be recalled that the technology in this episode does not go into repairing the well, but into the fraudulent display of fireworks with which he awes the populace. (Smith, "Ideas" 413)

Hank's power over technology and fire is just an illusion, a myth. Ironically, he is able to see the superstitions of the people of Camelot but does not recognize his own illusions. Hank has no true power. All of his good intentions burn away.

Hank makes special note of Morgan Le Fay's evil. However, she is not the only perpetrator of crimes against humanity, crimes associated with fire. Twain continues to use fire to portray human suffering and human evil after Hank begins traveling the kingdom. Traveling the land as a commoner gives Hank numerous opportunities to note the evils of mankind, atrocities associated with flames.

In the first item of significance, fire is introduced very subtly. A young girl is beaten severely and is then sold to a blacksmith: "He [the slave driver] snatched the child from her, and then made the men slaves who were chained before and behind her throw her on the ground and hold her there and expose her body, and then he laid on with his lash like a madman till her back was flayed. . ." (Twain, Yankee 199). The

people watching look on and comment “on the expert way in which the whip was handled. They were much too hardened by the life-long every-day familiarity with slavery to notice that there was anything else in the exhibition that invited comment” (199-200). Again, Twain condemns not only the evil of the man wielding the whip but the indifference that the bystanders have to the suffering of others.

Immediately following this beating, the young girl is sold to the “blacksmith” (Twain, Yankee 200). She throws herself into the arms of another slave who attempts to comfort her:

He strained her to his breast, and smothered her face and the child’s with kisses, and washed them with the rain of his tears. I suspected. I inquired. Yes, I was right: it was husband and wife. They had to be torn apart by force; the girl had to be dragged away, and she struggled and fought and shrieked like one gone mad till a turn of the road hid her from sight; and even after that, we could still make out the fading plaint of those receding shrieks. And the husband and father, with his wife and child gone, never to be seen by him again in life?—well, the look of him one might not bear at all, and so I turned away; but I knew I should never get his picture out of my mind again. . . . (200)

Again, Twain adequately demonstrates the indifference that man has for the suffering of others. This blacksmith is not moved by the couple’s despair and Twain indirectly associates that evil with fire. Twain could have chosen to sell the girl to a shopkeeper, or a king, or a nobleman, or a baker. Instead, he chooses a blacksmith, an occupation

associated with the Greek god Vulcan who works in a volcano while fanning heat and fire. Fire is connected to the evils people commit and to the indifference that human beings have for one another. The blacksmith is fanning this fuel by contributing to the cruelty. The blacksmith does not recognize the human despair caused by the separation of families. Thus, fire has a contrasting, dual purpose: it reveals human cruelty and portrays human despair.

Another dual revelation involves mobs. Hank and the king have several opportunities to observe mob mentality. Four of those instances are heavily associated with fire. Mobs seem to be Twain's extreme example of the unthinking, uncaring, damned human race and remind the reader of Sherburn's damning tirade in The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn: "The pitifulest thing out is a mob" (Twain, Huck 145). Fire is an appropriate symbol for a mob since an uncontrolled fire, like a mob, destroys anyone who gets in its path, and it is volatile. Fire symbolizes the evil nature of the mob even as it reveals human suffering.

Several fires are linked to mobs. After the king joins Hank on his journey, they have the opportunity to witness the ravages of a mob. In the distance, Hank notices a "red glow, a good way off" (Twain, Yankee 292). The "red blur" is joined by a "faint show of lightning" (292-293). Although not technically fire, lightning and fire are closely related. Like fire, lightning reveals. Also, upon striking, lightning creates fire, igniting whatever it strikes. This lightning reveals "the writhing face of a man who was hanging from a tree!" (293). The lightning continues to glare, revealing "both men and women hunted by the mob. The fearful work went on until nearly dawn. Then, the fire being out and the storm spent, the voices and flying footsteps presently ceased, and

darkness and stillness reigned again" (294). The mob only continues as long as the lightning and the fire continue; when the outside storms subside, the inner anger of the mob also dies and the mob becomes again human. Ironically not only have the fires revealed the atrocities of the night, but they have also symbolically reflected the evil, unthinking actions of the mob; once the mob's emotions are spent, the storm subsides.

The next morning, Hank and the king discover further evidence of the night's black mischief, evils also associated with fire. The manor house burned and the family was saved, "with one exception, the master . . . after a while he was found--what was left of him--which was his corpse. It was in a copse three hundred yards away, bound, gagged, stabbed in a dozen places" (Twain, *Yankee* 295). This murder is the incident which had sparked the mob as they attempted to find out who had killed the master. Ironically, the perpetrators of the murder attempted to destroy the master's control and ruthlessness; the plan backfires. An unexplained fire reveals the deed: "At ten or eleven at night, when everybody was in bed, the manor house burst into flames" (295). Like the master, the mob has no compassion and develops a savage ruthlessness: "A suspicion was enough. . . . Eighteen persons hanged or butchered; and two yeomen and thirteen prisoners lost in the fire" (296). Imitating uncontrolled fire, the mob acts without thinking, killing the innocent. Like a raging forest fire, all people in the mob's path, innocent and guilty, are destroyed. The fires and the mob are again out of control and incapable of productive use.

The mob does not think as it kills. Nor does it think in reference to the master's prisoners. The prisoners in the master's dungeons are not released during the fire and are burned alive. Hank asks, "But the people arrived in time to save the family; how is

it they could save none of the prisoners?" (Twain, Yankee 296). To this the man looked "puzzled, and said: 'Would one unlock the vaults at such a time? Marry, some would have escaped'" (296). Since the men were only criminals, nobody, except Hank, seems to care about their death or their suffering. Hank states, "That old baron got only what he deserved. If I had my way, all his kind should have the same luck" (299). All people without consciences deserve to burn. Twain burns them symbolically, a cleansing technique. However, the innocent have also been burned alive, revealing the initial atrocities that require a cleansing. Again, fire has a dual nature; it reveals atrocities even as it cleanses.

After becoming enslaved, Hank and the King witness even more mob activity. In one scene, a mob is pursuing a woman accused of witchcraft. They intend to burn her at the stake:

A mob of people came tearing after her, some with torches, and they said she was a witch who had caused several cows to die by a strange disease, and practiced her arts by help of a devil in the form of a black cat. This poor woman had been stoned until she hardly looked human, she was so battered and bloody. The mob wanted to burn her. (Twain, Yankee 353)

As the enslaved men attempt to shield her, the slave master sees "his chance. He said, burn her here, or they shouldn't have her at all" (354). The mob proceeds to do so:

They fastened her to a post; they brought wood and piled it about her; they applied the torch while she shrieked and pleaded and strained

her two young daughters to her breast; and our brute, with a heart solely for business, lashed us into position about the stake and warmed us into life and commercial value by the same fire which took the innocent life of that poor harmless mother. (354)

The master, representative of people indifferent to the suffering of others, is oblivious to the suffering of the innocent mother. He is only concerned with keeping his property, the slaves, warm and alive. Therefore, he callously uses the burning mother to increase the value of his property. He ignores the value of a human life, the mother, in order to save his property, possessions that are ironically also human lives. The mob, representative of evil, murders this innocent woman in a cruel fashion due to a minor and false suspicion. Again, like a forest fire, the mob is out of control. Twain's fire, connected to a mob, is used to reveal the atrocities of mankind to the reader.

Twain immediately follows with another mob scene. Shortly after the burning death of the older mother, Twain describes a young mother who is about to be unjustly hanged by a mob:

One day we ran into a procession. . . . All the riff-raff of the kingdom seemed to be comprehended in it; and all drunk at that. In the van was a cart with a coffin in it, and on the coffin sat a comely young girl of about eighteen, suckling a baby, which she squeezed to her breast in a passion of love every little while, and every little while wiped from its face the tears which her eyes rained down upon it; and always the foolish little thing smiled up at her, happy and content, kneading

her breast with its dimpled fat hand, which she patted and fondled  
right over her breaking heart. (Twain, Yankee 354-355)

The crowd that follows is typical of Twain's mobs; they are evil and again associated with fire: "Men and women, boys and girls, trotted along beside or after the cart, hooting, shouting profane and ribald remarks, singing snatches of foul song, skipping, dancing--a very holiday of hellions, a sickening sight" (355). Twain notes that the evils of mankind are not limited to older men and women; children quickly follow the examples of their hellish teachers. He also calls the mob hellions, again indirectly comparing the negative actions of the mob to the actions of demons, beings who thrive in hell and torment others.

Twain describes the injustice of this young woman's death. The young mother has been sentenced to death because she stole a piece of cloth in order to provide food for her starving baby. When her story is told, "all were touched, and there was disposition to deal mercifully with her, seeing that she was so young and friendless, and her case so piteous, and the law that robbed her of her support to blame as being the first and only cause of her transgression" (Twain, Yankee 356). The mob that formerly wanted her dead is now feeling the pangs of guilt. However, Twain lets the reader know that it is now too late: mankind should have noticed her needs prior to her point of desperation. Instead, rigid, unbending laws created and enforced by mankind have allowed her to suffer. She has suffered too long to be now saved.

The woman, in a heartbreaking scene, kisses her infant good-bye and is hanged. Before her death, the priest promises to care for her child until his death. At this point, Twain reminds the reader of the significance of fire: "You should have seen her face



then! Gratitude? Lord, what do you want with words to express that? Words are only painted fire; a look is the fire itself. She gave that look, and carried it away to the treasury of heaven, where all things that are divine belong” (Twain, Yankee 357).

Twain reminds the reader that, while his words may not do justice in describing the pains of mankind, the reader has eyes and can see. Twain attempts to show the evil of inhumanity, but he realizes that his portrayals of injustice are just well-painted words. It is up to the reader to look around and find living examples of people in need. Twain hopes to change the way society reacts to other human beings with his words, his “painted fire” (357). In other words, Twain is attempting to create a metamorphosis in his reader. Painted fire becomes a symbol for Twain’s language that he feels cannot quite adequately describe injustice and reminds the reader of human suffering.

Fires and mobs also help create a metamorphosis. One such example illustrates what David Ketterer calls “a revelation and reversal of fortune” (423). Ketterer observes that many of the fires or “apocalyptic image[s]” do two things; they reveal new ideas and, at the same time, reverse Hank’s position (419). As an example, Ketterer notes how Hank and the king are captured by the slaveholders: a mob “raised their pile of dry brush and damp weeds higher and higher, and when they saw the thick cloud begin to roll up and smother the tree, they broke out in a storm of joy-clamors” (Twain, Yankee 343). This burning turns Hank and the king from high ranking noblemen to mere slaves. This fire is both “destructive and creative” as it removes the pair’s authority, yet places Hank and the king in a position where they can develop a new point of view (Ketterer 423). Because Hank and the king are given a new position, they change. In particular, the king becomes much more sympathetic to his

ordinary subjects, changing numerous laws involving slavery. Fire destroys the pair's old political positions, allowing new ideas and social constructs to develop.

Mobs are an example of destructive forces connected to fire. However, Ketterer also notes that Twain often uses fire as an "apocalyptic image" that not only reveals but also cleanses (419). Hank sets this symbol in motion at the very beginning of the novel. Soon after Hank's arrival in Camelot, he is "chained to the stake; it [the hush of the people] still continued while the fagots were carefully and tediously piled about my ankles, my knees, my thighs, my body. Then there was a pause, and a deeper hush, if possible, and a man knelt down at my feet with a blazing torch" (Twain, Yankee 46). Just then, "was my eclipse beginning! The life went boiling through my veins; I was a new man!" (47). This near-death experience, associated with a fire and an eclipse, gives Hank a new position in this medieval life. The people of Camelot believe that Hank holds power over the sun when, in reality, he has used their superstitions and tricked them. Regardless, his new position, "the Boss," allows him to travel the countryside and correct some of the evils of society (145). Fire has helped create a new position for Hank and helped give him a new power.

Hank intends to use his power to better the populace, educating them. However, his attempts fail. Even the newspapers, Hank's attempt to inform and educate the populace, are not constructive. The newspaper reports, amid several comic typographical errors, "INFERNAL FIRE AND SMOKE AND THUNDER!" and "BRER MERLIN WORKS HIS ARTS BUT GETS LEFT! . . . But t he Boss scores on his first Innings!" (Twain, Yankee 257). His intentions to inform and educate quickly turn into propaganda pieces promoting his power: "Yes, it was too loud. . . . there was

too lightsome a tone of flippancy all through the paper. . . . I found myself unpleasantly affected by pert little irreverencies. . .” (258). Even though the paper helps increase the superstition surrounding Hank, his false pride indicates that he is not treated with enough respect. He cannot control his creations nor can he permanently change the society. His reaction to the newspapers also signals that his attitude, pride, and arrogance are growing out of control; he will soon lose control of his illusional power.

However, Hank does use his power, fraudulently, to help the monks. In order to con the people into believing that he has power, Hank uses fireworks: “tools, pump, lead pipe, Greek fire, sheaves of big rockets, roman candles, colored-fire sprays, electric apparatus, and a lot of sundries--everything necessary for the stateliest kind of a miracle” (Twain, Yankee 218). After mending the simple leak that had caused the well’s water to drop, Hank and his helpers prepare to demonstrate their miracle. They do not explain the simple mechanics that it took to fix the well; instead, they arrange a “stage-wait . . . it is always good to let your audience have a chance to work up its expectancy” (221). At the appointed time, Hank shouts some gibberish, and lights various fires which ignite the rockets: the “hideous blue glare,” the “red fire,” “the green fire,” and the “purple glare” (221-222). At this point, “There they were, all going at once, red, blue, green, purple!--four furious volcanoes pouring vast clouds of radiant smoke aloft, and spreading a blinding rainbowed noonday to the furthest confines of that valley” (222). He does not stop; he intends to make the legend of his miracle last for years to come. He shouts: “Lo, I command the fell spirit that possesses the holy fountain to now disgorge into the skies all the infernal fires that still remain in him, and straightway dissolve his spell and flee hence to the pit, there to lie bound a

thousand years” (222-223). He then “touched off the hogshod of rockets, and a vast fountain of dazzling lances of fire vomited itself toward the zenith with a hissing rush, and burst in mid-sky into a storm of flashing jewels!” (223).

Once again Hank uses fire to accomplish his purpose: “It was a great night, an immense night. There was reputation in it. I could hardly get to sleep for glorying over it” (Twain, Yankee 224). On one hand, Hank has performed a great service; the well has been cleared and is now workable. On the other hand, the fire that has been utilized is only an illusion. Fire has not contributed to the actual clearing of the well; it has only contributed to his reputation and to his pride. He is tearing down one institution and setting himself in its place. Hank does not see the hypocrisy or the arrogance of his actions. Once again, like Morgan Le Fay, he is placing himself as supreme ruler over the land. He is doing so by using technology to create an illusion that increases his fearsome reputation. Twain uses the fire imagery to help reveal the folly of Hank’s actions as well as the arrogance and hypocrisy that he is developing.

This reputation becomes an all-consuming concern of Hank’s, contributing to his false pride. Ironically, although he claims that he is concerned about morality and cleansing the land of society’s evils, when he has a chance to do a just act, he chooses not to do so in order to preserve the reputation about himself that is being created. After Hank witnesses the sale of the girl to the blacksmith, he thinks, “I wanted to stop the whole thing and set the slaves free, but that would not do” (Twain, Yankee 200). The only reason he halts his hand is because he is working to preserve his reputation: “I must not interfere too much and get myself a name for riding over the country’s laws and citizens’ rights roughshod” (200).

This reputation is based upon trickery and dishonesty, created by fire. By the end of the novel, James M. Cox notes that “Morgan becomes a grotesque caricature of the enlightenment he advocates. . . . [H]is only means of attracting attention being to run faster and faster, to do bigger and bigger things, until the mechanism of his character flies apart” (392). Twain uses Hank and fire to reveal that technology is only another form of superstition. Hank’s enlightenment is a false utopia.

Because his technology has been so heavily associated with fire and volcanoes waiting to erupt, readers can easily predict the ending of Hank’s new, technological Camelot. These numerous fires and volcanoes, symbolic of evil and corrupt behaviors, can only mean that the technology will end up being destructive. Thus, fire works on a new level; it also operates as foreshadowing, revealing the end of the novel to the reader. Twain does not disappoint the reader; his novel ends with an apocalyptic boom. Ironically, Twain uses fire to cleanse the land of technology, the evil knights, and even Hank Morgan.

Because Hank fears that the church or Merlin will overtake his factories, he “sent an order to the factories, and to all our great works, to stop operations and remove all life to a safe distance, as everything was going to be blown up, by secret mines” (Twain, *Yankee* 426). Thus, all of Camelot’s technology is destroyed, by fire: “In that explosion all our noble civilization-factories went up in the air, and disappeared from the earth. It was a pity, but it was necessary. We could not afford to let the enemy turn our own weapons against us” (431-432). Again, fire symbolizes an uncontrollable element; like the mobs and Morgan Le Fay, Hank’s technology can no longer be controlled by him. As a result, the sleeping volcanoes are destroyed by

explosive fire before they can be turned against their creator, Hank. Again, fire reveals the illusion of his power. His power has not been real; true power could not be turned against its creator. A person who wielded true power would maintain control; Hank has lost control. In this instance, fire and volcanoes are used to reveal the loss of control and the illusion of Hank's power.

Hank sees the Church's arrogance but ignores his own. Ironically, he issues a "congratulatory proclamation" that reads, in part, "Your General congratulates you! In the pride of his strength and the vanity of his renown, an arrogant enemy came against you. . ." (Twain, Yankee 432). However, the reader has begun to associate Hank with fire and does see the hypocrisy. Despite his desire for utopia, Lynn says, "he has a relentless and unforgiving contempt for the human race" (Lynn 384). This contempt causes a conflict in his desire to create a moral society. As a result, even though Hank views himself as a moral being, he becomes associated with uncontrollable, evil fire, an idea that grows as the novel progresses. His attempts to enslave Camelot to his vision and control are no better than Morgan's enslavements or the mob's unthinking atrocities. Even though he claims that he is concerned about the individuals of Camelot, fire reveals his superiority problems and the contempt that he has for human beings.

The contempt that Hank has for other human beings allows him to set about mass destruction, another example of human cruelty revealed by fire. After being attacked by thousands of knights, he then unleashes his final fire, the electric fence. Hank and Clarence first notice "a smell of burning flesh" and discover that one man has been killed upon the fence (Twain, Yankee 437). The deaths then escalate:

We stood by the inner fence and watched the silent lightning do its awful work upon that swarming host. One could make out but little of detail; but he could note that a black mass was piling itself up beyond the second fence. That swelling bulk was dead men! Our camp was enclosed with a solid wall of the dead--a bulwark, a breastwork, of corpses, you may say. . . . I sent a current through the third fence now; and almost immediately through the fourth and fifth, so quickly were the gaps filled up. I believed the time was come, now, for my climax; I believed that the whole army was in our trap. Anyway, it was high time to find out. So I touched a button and set fifty electric suns aflame on the top of our precipice. (439)

Twain has not completed his apocalyptic vision, however. Hank orders his men to "Open fire!" (440). At this point, "the thirteen gatlings began to vomit death into the fated ten thousand. They halted, they stood their ground a moment against that withering deluge of fire, then they broke, faced about and swept toward the ditch like chaff before a gale . . . to death by drowning" (440). Hank states that within "ten short minutes after we had opened fire, armed resistance was totally annihilated, the campaign was ended, we fifty-four were masters of England! Twenty-five thousand men lay dead around us" (440). His attempt at utopia, a utopia controlled by technology, has ended in a bitter-sweet success: "how treacherous is fortune" (440). The perfect society, created by technological fire, is only one man's vision of Utopia. Hanks attempt to force his vision on the past, a vision that is associated with fire, has been destroyed by it.

The success of the army, even bitter sweet, is short lived, however. The men “were in a trap, you see--a trap of our own making” (Twain, Yankee 443). Twain reveals the double edged sword of technology. Hank’s technology has given his men a victory, but it has also destroyed them: “If we stayed where we were, our dead would kill us; if we moved out of our defences, we should no longer be invincible” (443). The technology that was so lauded, has turned into the enemy, just as the railroad destroyed the riverboat days. Everyone is made “sick by the poisonous air bred by those dead thousands” (443). The manuscript soon ends. Technology has contributed to evil, fire has destroyed all, Merlin has sent Hank into a sleep that will deliver him back into his present, and all are dead or dying.

By destroying all of Camelot’s technology, Twain has “translate[ed] a foreboding sense of personal disaster into a public one,” as Kenneth Lynn explains (389). Many critics, such as Lynn, see the ending as Twain symbolically blowing up his damned technological typesetter that has cost him so much money. Henry Nash Smith states that “frustrated in his attempt to come to terms with the industrial revolution, he [Twain] gave up the modern world for lost, and during the rest of his career devoted most of his energy to composing variations on the theme expressed in his slogan of ‘the damned human race’” (“Ideas” 417).

However, in Twain’s fiery ending, Twain does so much more. First, in a time when, Lynn notes, “many Americans turned to utopian fictions for reassurance,” Twain shows that one person’s utopia is another person’s hell (Lynn 386). It warns Americans of too quickly embracing any unrealistic, shallow “brave new world a-coming,” as the perfect society may be gilded (386). Accordingly, Twain destroys one



man's utopia with hellish, nightmarish electrical fire. Twain also shows the folly of Hank's actions by destroying his inner fire, his arrogance and his ambition.

Secondly, the ending warns readers about the dangers of technology. Twain suggests that one should not be quick to replace the old ways with technological advances. On the other hand, the ending also destroys the knights who embrace the old world order. Thus, Twain is letting the reader know, in no uncertain terms, that problems exist in both resisting all change and in embracing all technological advances too readily.

Thirdly, the ending of the story fully reveals Hank's folly, committing atrocities in the name of establishing a false new world order. Perhaps Hank is symbolic of the historical Yankees who, on one hand destroyed the evils of slavery, but on the other hand, damaged the South during Reconstruction and did not help the newly freed slaves ease into society. Hank's brave new world is a good creation when he concentrates on righting moral injustices. However, Hank becomes more concerned with his reputation; he commits fiery acts in order to increase his reputation. He is worried about his political position; he chooses to ignore some injustices which he has power to change because he does not want to threaten his position as boss. Hank also chooses technology over superstition; however, he forces Camelot to accept his vision and he uses superstition in an attempt to create that vision.

Finally, the ending of the novel reintroduces Twain's dream state, a state that is frequently connected to fire. For instance, when Hank is about to be burned at the stake, he believes he is dreaming. In A Connecticut Yankee, the dream state returns when Merlin, the alleged fake, performs a final act of sorcery, causing Hank to

“sleepeth, now--and shall sleep thirteen centuries” (Twain, Yankee 443). Merlin, after causing this sleep, is killed by electrical fire when he “fetched up against one of our wires” (443). Hank “never stirred--sleeps like a stone. If he does not wake to-day, we shall understand what kind of a sleep it is, and his body will then be borne to a place in one of the remote recesses of the cave where none will ever find it to desecrate it” (443). The sleep state introduced in the beginning frame is re-introduced, placing the entire novel in a dream.

In the final chapter of the novel, Hank Morgan is lost in the present, technological age. Ironically, surrounded by modern conveniences, Hank now longs for the past. As Hank once thought he was dreaming of Camelot, he now thinks that he dreams of the present:

And such dreams! such strange and awful dreams, Sandy! Dreams that were as real as reality--delirium, of course, but so real! . . . I seemed to be a creature out of a remote unborn age, centuries hence, and even that was as real as the rest! Yes, I seemed to have flown back out of that age into this of ours, and then forward to it again, and was set down, a stranger and forlorn in that strange England, with an abyss of thirteen centuries yawning between me and you! between me and my home and my friends! between me and all that is dear to me, all that could make Life worth the living. . . . don't let me go out of my mind again; death is nothing, let it come, but not with those dreams, not with the torture of those hideous dreams--I cannot endure that

again. . . . (Twain, Yankee 447)

Hank then dies; time separates him from the age that he once resented and attempted to change, but now appreciates and loves.

Ironically, Hank's trials through fire have cleansed Hank of his ambition, his power, his pride, and his arrogance. He longs for a simple past, away from the modern man he ironically represents: "It [the modern age] was awful--awfuler than you can ever imagine. . . don't let me go out of my mind again" (447). Once again, Twain shows the reader that there is no perfection except through morality. Hank only achieves utopia with his love for Sandy and by helping his common man. The modern age, represented by technology, does not allow this utopia to exist. Bernard L. Stein further comments on Hank's dream-like state:

Returned to his own time, the Yankee finds the nineteenth century intolerable. Bereft of friends, family, and ultimately the will to live, he lapses into a new dream--a dying delirium--in which his most recent past has become the nightmare. Thus, A Connecticut Yankee anticipates the twentieth-century Mark Twain who compulsively wrote of dreamers unable to tell their waking from their "dreaming moments." (xvi)

Like Hank, with mounting debts and family illnesses, Twain's present is becoming a nightmare. Like Hank, Twain longs for the past; this desire is symbolized by his attempt to reconstruct his past in Life on the Mississippi. While embracing technology, the typesetter, Twain also loathes the technology that ended the joys of the riverboat days and restricts his ability to successfully to return the river. A Connecticut

Yankee in King Arthur's Court uncovers all of Twain's demons: his conflicting emotions about technology, his desire to return to the pleasurable past on the river, his desire to change parts of his past, and the nightmarish fires that tormented his young life.

Twain transports the fires of his childhood nightmares into A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court, but he does not use fire in only one dimension. Instead, fire is used in myriad and complex ways. For instance, fire reveals human suffering even as it represents the people and mobs who cause the suffering. Likewise, fire symbolizes superstition and technology, two apparently opposite ideas, and is then used in an attempt to destroy the very ideas it represents. Fire also indicates Hank's pride, reputation, ambition, power, and arrogance. Again, trials by fire are used to cleanse Hank of these negative traits that are also represented by fire. Finally, fire denotes change and reversal. Ironically, Hank uses fire to force his technological changes upon Camelot only to have the fire turn and reinstate the original society.

The complexity of Twain's fire imagery only emphasizes his skill as a writer. After watching the tramp burn to death, it would have been incredibly easy for Twain to limit his fire imagery to negative concepts. However, Twain does not restrict his imagination. Fire is used to portray both negative and positive ideas, fully acknowledging the dual nature of fire. Fire can be harnessed for good; fires create the reversal that allows the king to develop a better sense of justice. However, fires can also burn out of control for evil; the same fires that open the king's eyes also destroy numerous human beings. A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court fully develops the dualities of fire.

### Conclusion

A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court, written a mere six years after Life on the Mississippi, has striking similarities to Twain's autobiographical tale of Mississippi River life. In Life on the Mississippi, he makes an attempt to recapture his past and his lost innocence; he fails. Kenneth S. Lynn believes that one reason he begins writing A Connecticut Yankee is to provide a rebuttal to "Twain's terrible sense of loss that resulted from his 1882 trip to the river" (383). As a result, Hank's attempts to move into a past life, bettering it, also fail. Both novels reveal Twain's cynicism; they both portray a loss of innocence.

There are other similarities between Life on the Mississippi and A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court. Hank, the hero of A Connecticut Yankee, does have a marked resemblance to Twain. Hank moves between the past and the present, eventually idealizing the past. Likewise, Twain longs for the romance of his past and usually chooses to idealize his past in his writing. Life on the Mississippi demonstrates this idealism: "The things about me and before me made me feel like a boy again--convinced me that I was a boy again, and that I had simply been dreaming an unusually long dream" (372). Twain also hints that he wishes that "I could have been a boy again" (372). Hank's attempt to conquer Camelot ends in failure: Merlin states, "Ye were conquerors; ye are conquered! These others are perishing--you also. Ye shall all die in this place--every one--except him [Hank]. He sleepth, now--and shall sleep thirteen centuries" (Twain, Yankee 443). When Hank awakens, he mourns his losses and dies. Similarly, Twain is forced to confront the demons of his past and cannot successfully recapture the romance of his past and the river:

During my three days' stay in the town, I woke up every morning  
 with the impression that I was a boy--for in my dreams the faces  
 were all young again, and looked as they had looked in the old times  
 --but I went to bed a hundred years old, every night--for meantime  
 I had been seeing those faces as they are now. (Twain, Life, 382)

Both novels reflect a sense of loss and failure.

Fire also severs Twain and Hank from an ideal past. Kenneth S. Lynn further states that "the steamboat catastrophe with which the cub pilot's education had concluded flowers horribly in A Connecticut Yankee into a machine-created cataclysm in which no one is spared, including Hank Morgan" (389). The steamboat explosion from Life on the Mississippi, which involved a horrible fire, is transported into A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court when Twain destroys much of his created technology with explosions. Just as the steamboat explosion from Life on the Mississippi damages Twain emotionally through the loss of his brother, the holocaust at the end of A Connecticut Yankee destroys Hank. The steamboat explosion separates Twain from his idealized notions of the past and the river as well as separating him from his brother, Henry; the explosions of A Connecticut Yankee separate Hank from the idealized past and Sandy.

A stronger connection between the two works lies in the fact that both Life on the Mississippi and A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court utilize fire imagery in similar fashions. For instance, both works use fire to reveal human suffering and emphasize the evil nature of mankind. However, there are also striking differences.

First, although Life on the Mississippi heavily emphasizes fire as an indication of guilt or fear, A Connecticut Yankee completely ignores those connections. In Life on the Mississippi, Twain hints at a fear of fire: as a child he feared the fires of hell and as an adult he fears the steamboat explosion. Likewise, Twain links his feelings of guilt and his subsequent nightmares to fire. Although A Connecticut Yankee does utilize the idea of nightmare and fire, the links to guilt have vanished. Hank never acknowledges any guilty feelings for his attempt to change, manipulate, and control Camelot. Likewise, he shows little remorse for the mass destruction at the end of the novel. The final scene portrays a devastated, lonely man; one can assume that Hank has been adequately punished for his crimes. However, Hank does not seem to feel the weight of a guilty conscience as he dies.

Second, positive personality traits are equated with fire in Life on the Mississippi. For instance, fire reveals the heroism of the pilots who choose to pilot their burning steamboats to safety. In A Connecticut Yankee, however, these positive traits linked to fire have almost disappeared. The only positive trait revealed occurs when Twain links the expression of extreme gratitude to “painted fire” (357). However, the girl who demonstrates this expression is killed unjustly; Twain emphasizes the cruelty of society’s laws, not the gratitude.

Third, the humorous connections between violence and fire that are found in Life on the Mississippi have almost vanished from A Connecticut Yankee. Even though tragic examples of fire and violence do exist in Life on the Mississippi, readers seem to accept these examples in the non-fiction, admiring Twain for his ability to laugh in the face of tragedy. However, the violence and fire of A Connecticut Yankee

seem to detract from the humor of the novel. Readers remember the violence and overlook the humorous passages. As a result, Twain creates a darker, more satiric novel. By utilizing violence, Twain emphasizes his dark themes.

Although both works develop fire as an instrument that reveals human suffering and negative personality traits, A Connecticut Yankee is much more brutal and condemning of the human race. Twain does not use humor to lighten his condemnation; he allows the violence and evil of the people to develop fully. Life on the Mississippi demonstrates the negative traits of pride, theft, cheating, anger, and hatred. Most of the traits are wrapped in humor, lessening the negative effect. On the other hand, Twain uses little humor in A Connecticut Yankee as he utilizes fire to portray pride, mobs, ambition, power, arrogance, shallowness, insensitivity, and cruelty. Because the negative traits are not concealed by humor, the negativity of the human race receives a greater emphasis.

Likewise, both novels use fire to cleanse, change, and destroy. For example, in Life on the Mississippi, Twain describes how his romantic notions regarding the Mississippi River became more realistic as he studied the river. He also notes positive changes in a crowd as a speaker convinces them to change their minds. However, A Connecticut Yankee uses fire in a much more complex manner. Fire represents technology and superstition, for example; it also is used to cleanse the land of these ideas. Likewise, Hank is equated with fire; fire gives Hank his power. However, fire also helps destroy Hank and rids him of several negative personality traits. Twain seems to have developed his ideas of fire, utilizing fire imagery in complex dimensions and indicating his skill for writing.



Finally, as stated, Twain uses fire to represent superstition and technology in A Connecticut Yankee. Although Twain hints at these connections in Life on the Mississippi (fire is linked to the steamboat, for example), the associations among fire, technology, and superstition are much more fully developed in A Connecticut Yankee. This new development could possibly be connected to Twain's ill-fated experience with the Paige typesetter.

According to Kenneth S. Lynn, in 1880, Twain became "more deeply involved than ever before, both financially and emotionally, in a grandiose scheme of mechanical perfection" (387). In 1880, "Twain purchased two thousand dollars' worth of stock in the Paige typesetting machine, then being brought to completion in the Colt arms factory in Hartford" (Lynn 387). This investment began a cycle where Paige comes to Twain for more money so that he can complete the typesetter and Twain delivers. Twain believed in this machine and felt that it would make him filthy rich. In a letter to a New York publisher, Twain states, "This is by far the most marvelous invention ever contrived by man. And it is not a thing of rags and patches; it is made of massive steel, and will last a century" (qtd. in Lynn 387-388). He believed that it would bring him a profit of "fifty-five million dollars" (Lynn 387). Twain also shows his admiration for this machine to his brother, Orion: "It's a cunning devil, is that machine! . . . All the other inventions of the human brain sink pretty nearly into commonplace, contrasted with this awful mechanical miracle . . . The Paige Compositor marches alone and far in the lead of human inventions" (qtd. in Lynn 388).

However, there were problems with the machine, problems that Twain glosses over: "In two or three weeks . . . we shall work the stiffness out of her joints and have

her performing as smoothly and softly as human muscles” (qtd. in Lynn 388). In two weeks, “the machine was breaking types, and Paige tore it apart again to see what the trouble was. Once more, Twain had to reach into his pocket every month for another three thousand dollars; with his other hand he wrote the concluding chapters of A Connecticut Yankee” (Lynn 388). In addition, Twain was running low on funds:

“Twain was rapidly running out of money . . . The completion of the machine thus became a race against the exhaustion of Twain’s funds” (Lynn 387). To make matters worse, Twain’s “faith” in the machine had “grown into an obsession” (Lynn 387). Twain would not take a loss on the typesetter; the machine finally bankrupted him.

Corresponding to his personal life, A Connecticut Yankee appears to reveal Twain’s transformation from an admirer of technology and machinery to a pessimist who believes that this technology can be destructive. Ironically, Twain uses fire as a tool of destruction, creating an apocalyptic effect; Twain burns up or explodes the created technology of the novel.

The patterns of fire portrayed by Twain in Life on the Mississippi and A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court continue in Twain’s later works. For example, The Tragedy of Pudd’nhead Wilson and the Comedy of Those Extraordinary Twins (1894), Personal Recollections of Joan of Arc (1896), “The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg” (1889), The Mysterious Stranger (1916), and Letters from the Earth: Uncensored Writings by Mark Twain (1938) all reveal fire imagery that is used in complex ways. As in Life on the Mississippi and A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court, Twain continues to use fire in a multitude of ways: fire represents guilt, reveals human suffering, demonstrates reversal or change, destroys, symbolizes

negative people and actions, cleanses, provides foreshadowing, and represents superstition, technology, reputation, ambition, power, and arrogance. In other words, it is difficult to identify one major way in which fire is used; Twain's fire images undergo constant metamorphosis.

Even though fire is constantly transformed in Twain's literature, he repeats many of his ideas. For instance, fire continues to symbolize negative traits of the human race in his later works, revealing numerous atrocities and sufferings. For example, in Part V of "The Damned Human Race," Twain conducts experiments that conclude that man is "The Lowest Animal" (Twain, Letters 222). To help prove his theory, he cites how "three monks were burnt to death" (225). He argues that of "all the animals, man is the only one that is cruel" (225-226). In "The Damned Human Race" his humor has become sarcasm; it becomes difficult to laugh at his satire.

Twain also uses fire for the sake of humor that reveals. In "At a Fire," he describes the "Form of Tender of Rescue from Strange Young Gentleman to Strange young Lady at a Fire" (Letters 194). Poking fun at etiquette manuals of the day, he offers advice to young men who meet attractive young ladies in a burning building; he explains how a young man should introduce himself, how a young man should escort a lady to safety, how he should offer marriage, and whom to rescue first (potential mothers-in-law should be rescued last). In "At a Fire," Twain uses fire to reveal the absurdities of etiquette, creating satire. In contrast to "The Damned Human Race," this particular story is hilarious; the violence of the fire does not detract from the humor. Violence and despair are not the focus; humor is.

Twain continues to use fire to reveal feelings of guilt. For instance, in "Was It Heaven? Or Hell?," Twain has two sisters tell a lie for which they feel guilt. An angel later punishes them with uncertainty: "For liars a place is appointed. There they burn in the fires of hell from everlasting unto everlasting. Repent!" (Twain, Mysterious 160). The women are doomed to live with their guilty consciences and to wonder if they have been sentenced to heaven or hell. In contrast to earlier examples found in Tom Sawyer, biting satire has replaced humorous nostalgia. Readers note little humor. Twain does not subtly challenge the notions of hell; he attacks with a sledgehammer.

Fire is also used symbolically to cleanse society. In "The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg," Edward attempts to cleanse the temptation of money by burning the checks: "Put them in the fire! Quick! We mustn't be tempted. . . . Give them to me, since you can't do it!" He snatched them and tried to hold his grip till he could get to the stove; but he was human, he was a cashier. . ." (Twain, Mysterious 132). Edward does not allow fire to cleanse the temptation from his life.

As a result, fire also causes a reversal. Edward is transformed from a perfect human to a fallible human being. Edward realizes that he has imperfections. Fire symbolizes this realization or reversal: "It seems written with fire--it burns so. Mary--I am miserable again" (Twain, Mysterious 133). As in A Connecticut Yankee, the reversals teach the characters, revealing new thoughts about Life.

Another example of revelation occurs in Pudd'nhead Wilson. In the novel, Twain has a fire destroy a meeting hall. In a passage reminiscent of Life on the Mississippi, this fire gives the firemen "a chance to show off," revealing their concern

with their reputation and their pride. In addition, the fire symbolically reveals the corruption and arrogance of the politicians.

Twain's later novels reveal an author who has become even more bitter, satiric, sarcastic, and negative; the negativity of the author impacts the fire imagery. Thus, fire continues to symbolize Twain's increasing bitterness. In Twain's later fiction, he emphasizes the lack of control humans have over their environment, actions, and emotions. This transition is blazed with fire.

An example of fire that is used to emphasize the lack of control humans have over their lives exists in Twain's short novel, The Mysterious Stranger. In the novel, Father Adolf meets a so-called angel named Satan. Satan makes miniature human beings that he then examines as if they were a scientific experiment under a looking glass. Satan has total control over his creations who are eventually destroyed by him:

. . . the lightning blazed out flash upon flash and pierced the castle and set it on fire, and the flames shone out red and fierce through the cloud, and the people came flying out, shrieking, but Satan brushed them back. . . . [T]he castle's wreck . . . tumbled into the chasm, which swallowed it from sight and closed upon it, with all that innocent life, not one of the five hundred poor creatures escaping. (Twain,

Mysterious 173)

When the young boys cry because the miniature humans had "gone to hell," Satan replies, "Oh, it is no matter; we can make plenty more" (Twain, Mysterious 173). The novel ends with Satan's uncaring laughter:

. . . 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! (Twain, Mysterious 253)

Twain reveals his final, pessimistic transformation. He no longer holds the idealism of his riverboating days. Huck Finn, an idealistic, honorable young boy, is gone; Hank, an imperfect but well-intentioned man, has become Satan. Fire seems to blaze the path to his bitterness.

Fire imagery appears throughout Twain's literature, becoming stronger as he matures. Twain's travel novel reveals the trauma and guilt felt by the young Samuel Clemens as he watched the burning tramp die. Life on the Mississippi also shows how the author turned this traumatic memory into various literary devices. A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court uses a traumatic memory to develop complex imagery and symbolism. Both Life on the Mississippi and A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court demonstrate the complex writing skill of Mark Twain as he develops fire into a dual creation that represents both positive and negative events, sometimes simultaneously. Fire becomes an interesting element that provides laughter even as causes tears, that cleanses and creates even as it destroys, and that symbolizes both positive and negative humans, actions, and institutions. Like real fire, Twain's fire imagery undergoes constant metamorphosis, providing a fascinating topic for study.

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## Biography

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