

Blom, Paul. “‘A trap of our own making’: Mark Twain and the Mechanized Warfare of King Arthur’s Court.” *War, Myths, and Fairy Tales*. Eds. Sara Buttsworth and Maartje Abbenhuis. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. Jan. 2017.

Abstract

An orphan child inherits a magical object that reveals a noble destiny. This child, guided by a wise and beneficent entity with magical capabilities, endures quests, slays monsters, leads the people, and inspires other heroes to similar deeds of valor before finally falling to dark forces. The legends of King Arthur and his knights of the Round Table as we’ve come to know them today are permeated with the thematic elements prevalent in most western fairy tales. They captivate and inspire us, they guide and instruct us. They are sources of entertainment, stories of courage, and cautionary tales.

Every culture of every era has its fairy tales, the legends and myths it uses to explain and understand the world around them, to instruct moral lessons and warnings, and to celebrate past deeds in hopes of inspiring other such deeds in the future. These stories of magic and instruction entertain us and guide us and reveal insights into the cultures that spawned such legends. I contend that the Arthurian legends could be considered fairy tales and myths, stories of magical swords, noble quests, and mystical artifacts. These stories, which are an amalgamation of French and British folklore, have been told countless times in a variety of ways, but the core figures and events remain the same. In the same manner in which the story of Cinderella has been told and retold through a variety of media and set in many different eras, the story of King Arthur has been told and reimagined endlessly, although the iconic images and figures remain: Excalibur, Merlin, the Round Table, Camelot. Whether Arthur is depicted as a naïve young king or a tired tyrant, the story endures because it continues to inspire, captivate, and instruct.

The tales of King Arthur and his court, as we’ve come to know them, however, are the products of the romanticizing of the horrific and brutal violence of sixth-century Britain. The mythos surrounding the figure of King Arthur and his court have transformed a sixth-century warlord into a beloved and enduring figure. In his novel, *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court*, Twain introduces a nineteenth-century factory worker into Camelot in order to undercut the Arthurian fairy tale, stripping away the romance to reveal to us the horrific realities lying at the heart of that fairy tale: brutal violence, war, and murder. At first, it seems as though Twain is criticizing the era this fairy tale represents, sixth-century or Arthurian Britain, but I believe that, as the novel progresses and as one digs deeper into the novel, one should realize that Twain is using Arthurian Britain as a mirror on which we can reflect our own era. When Twain’s protagonist, Hank Morgan, criticizes sixth-century Britain, Twain is revealing Morgan’s hypocrisy in that Morgan fails to recognize the horrific realities lying at the heart of his own era as well, that of nineteenth-century America. When Twain reveals to us the brutal violence at the heart of Arthurian Britain and the narrator’s abhorrence of that violence, I argue that the reader is meant to recognize the brutal violence at the heart of nineteenth-century America and perhaps within our own time as well.

After all, every culture has its fairy tales, its myths and grand narratives. The enduring grand narrative of American culture is that of progress through technology: the taming of the wilderness, the civilizing of humanity, the power of the people to share their opinions and be heard for the sake of maintaining liberty and equality. Ultimately, though, Twain reveals to us that humanity has not progressed as far as we might like to think. When the reader is first forced to confront the brutal realities of Arthurian Britain that exist beneath the veneer of the fairy tale, the reader may be shocked and disgusted. As the novel progresses and Morgan uses nineteenth-century technology to slaughter thousands of knights with the push of a few buttons, the reader should then be even more dismayed as Twain reveals the ugly truths behind the American fairy tale of technological progress. Technology has instead made the industry of murder and death simpler and easier to the point at which users of modern technology have become alienated from the end result of that technology. Modern weaponry makes it all too easy to take a life without taking into consideration the physical reality of such an action. In the novel, then, Twain uses Arthurian Britain to show a nineteenth-century reader the dangerous way in which modern technology detaches the individual of any era from the results of that very technology.

When Twain introduces the horrors of nineteenth-century mechanized production and warfare into the Arthurian romance, his narrator transforms a visceral and difficult task of destruction into something akin to assembly line labor, violence and death perpetuated on a massive scale. In Twain's novel, I see the mingling of horror and romance. While many critics focus on the ways in which Twain deconstructs the Arthurian legend, I believe that he only does this so that he can use Arthurian Britain as a foil against nineteenth-century Britain in order to criticize newly emerging technologies, especially technologies related to warfare and violence, warning his readers of the ways in which such new technologies can rob us of our own humanity and lead to our doom. Ultimately, Twain strips down a fairy tale to show us the brutal violence at its heart in the hopes that the reader will then become aware of the brutal violence at the heart of our own culture.