

Future as Past, Past as Future: Edward Bellamy, Mark Twain, and the Crisis of the 1880s

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The recent back-to-back centennial celebrations of Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward* (1888) and Mark Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1889) afford an opportunity to examine these two famous novels both critically and comparatively. Bellamy and Twain produced strikingly different visions of American society out of a common set of fears and anxieties about the unfolding social conditions of the 1880s. They veered in opposite directions in attempting to address the major economic and social questions of the day. Their efforts occurred as part of a larger reformist literary movement in the late nineteenth century. Between 1884 and 1899, the "Golden Era of nineteenth-century utopian writing" according to literary critic Kenneth Roemer, over a 160 such works appeared.¹

Looking Backward and *Connecticut Yankee* are among the major works of this period and share some characteristics common to all utopian writing. Like the majority of works in this genre, both novels are time-travel narratives. Each utilizes the fantasy of a different period of time and circumstance as their setting. In each case, a state of unconsciousness serves as the pathway from the present to the utopian alternative. Both books itemize examples of economic, political, and social reform which, taken as a whole, advance a theoretical

1 Kenneth M. Roemer, "Utopia and Victorian Culture, 1884-1899," an essay in his edited study, *America as Utopia* (New York, 1981), p. 305. Roemer is the leading scholar of late-nineteenth-century utopian literature and has published *The Obsolete Necessity: America in Utopian Writings 1888-1900* (Kent, Ohio, 1976). Two other works that cover this same period are Robert L. Shurter, *The Utopian Novel In America, 1865-1900* (New York, 1973) and Jean Pfaelzer, *The Utopian Novel in America 1886-1896: The Politics of Form* (Pittsburgh, 1884).

model of an ideal society. The two novels stress, in their respective approaches, the need for a national solution, including a broad restructuring of values, institutions, and practices. And, finally, they each fit Kenneth Roemer's definition of a literary utopia as: "a fairly detailed description of an imaginary community, society, or world—a 'fiction' that encourages readers to experience vicariously a culture that represents a prescriptive, normative alternative to their own culture."²

Bellamy and Twain began their initial drafts in 1886. Each of the novels can be examined, as a result, as artifacts of a specific period in American culture, a time of growing discord in the United States, particularly seen in the intensifying battle between industrial owners and workers. The "labor question," and its unsettling affect on the whole society, deeply affected both authors. Their books reflect a common concern over the cultural disintegration that Twain and Bellamy believed was undermining Victorian America.

Looking Backward and *Connecticut Yankee*, nevertheless, represent very different expressions of the utopian novel. The former is largely *eutopian* in focus, an outstanding example of a novel that projects the good society. Mark Twain's novel is primarily *dystopian*, a work that is centered on a defective, if not tragically flawed, world. A brief survey of each work clarifies the major differences between the two novels. In *Looking Backward*, Edward Bellamy tells the story of Julian West, a proper, middle-class Bostonian who awakes from a 113-year sleep in 2000 A.D. West gradually comes to embrace a socialist, or "nationalist," format for the United States as the ideal form of government and society. During his stay in the future, West becomes convinced that the federal government, restructured into an "industrial army of workers," can reconcile existing social class antagonisms and incorporate new technologies into the creation of a perfect world. Awakened a second time, West finds himself back in 1887 where he quickly sounds the call for social reform. His pleas rejected as the ravings of a madman, Julian awakens yet a third time to find himself permanently in 2000 A. D. Boston, free of the turmoil of the nineteenth century.

In *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, Mark Twain spins a very different tale. He relates how Hank Morgan, a Hartford weapons factory superintendent, awakes from a knock on the head in 513 A.D. England. In the course of his stay, this practical-minded man attempts to modernize the economy, government, and society of King Arthur's Camelot. He makes considerable progress, but is constantly forced to demonstrate his seemingly "magical" talent of technological expertise. He becomes engaged in a struggle with the medieval church, nobility, and Merlin, who symbolizes an earlier "power of magic." In the end, Morgan's attempt at modernization collapses. He is attacked and, in defending himself, is forced to use nineteenth-century

2 Kenneth M. Roemer, "Defining America as Utopia," *Ibid.*, p. 3.

armaments, including the Gatling gun. As a consequence, he destroys the world he had wanted to reform. The final battle scene, with all its death and gore, has been identified by Henry Nash Smith as "one of the most distressing passages in American literature."³

Any attempt to explore the differences between *Connecticut Yankee* and *Looking Backward* should start with a biographical portrait of each author. Fifteen years the senior, Mark Twain began as Samuel Langhorne Clemens, born in 1835 on the Missouri frontier. His only settled period of life came between 1839 and 1853 when, as a youngster in Hannibal, he roamed the surrounding countryside, played along the banks of the Mississippi River, and explored the river itself. His curiosity about life carried him far from this stable environment in the coming years. In the 1860s, he traveled west, publishing as a journalist and short story writer throughout the decade. His desire to see new places took him on a tour of Europe, Asia Minor, and Palestine and led, in 1869, to the publication of *Innocents Abroad*, the book which gave him a national reputation as a writer. In 1870, Twain married and took up residence in Hartford, Connecticut, but throughout the 1870s and early 1880s he regularly traveled on lecture tours. The books continue to pour forth, including *Roughing It* (1872), *The Gilded Age* (1873), co-authored with Charles D. Warner, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876), *Life on the Mississippi* (1883), and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885).

Born in 1850 in Chicopee Falls, Massachusetts, Edward Bellamy came to maturity and the craft of writing in a vastly different setting than Twain. The son of a Baptist minister, he was raised in a settled, middle-class environment. He spent his entire life in Chicopee Falls, with the exception of a year abroad and brief stays in Boston, New York, and Colorado. Possessing an inquiring mind, Bellamy turned to reading, editing, and journalism. He traveled little, preferring to concentrate on a literary career, which he launched in 1879 with a serial novel called *The Duke of Stockbridge*. The next year he published *Dr. Heidenhoff's Process*, which gained the praise of William Dean Howells.

By the middle 1880s, Twain and Bellamy had lived fundamentally different lives. One had achieved a national reputation, was often on the lecture circuit and away from home, the other enjoyed a critical but modest success, rarely leaving his family or the locale wherein he had been born and raised. Twain had progressed, in the course of two decades, from "poor gentry" to a man of great wealth, while Bellamy remained tied securely to his middle-class origins and small-town values. The former had begun as an adolescent writer and his writing had reached a new degree of complexity and subtlety; the latter had started off as a writer of adult fiction and yearned to draft a compelling narrative that would reach a wider audience. Twain excelled in humor and satire.

³ Henry Nash Smith, *Mark Twain's Fable of Progress* (New Brunswick, New Jersey, 1964), p. 65.

while Bellamy wrote with utter seriousness. The two men were a study in contrasts, both as writers and in their manners and habits.

They shared the view, however, that growing labor unrest and other related social developments, such as the increased numbers of immigrants, posed serious challenges to the United States. They also concurred that the existing distribution of wealth generated the extremes of great fortunes and wide-spread deprivation, as Henry George had made clear in *Progress and Poverty* (1879). In 1886, the explosion of strikes, boycotts, lay-offs, and particularly the bombing at Chicago's Haymarket Square stunned both Twain and Bellamy, along with many other American intellectuals. The economic and social systems of the nation appeared on the verge of collapse. Their mutual concern for the nation's plight did not mean they agreed on a common solution to the problem.

The events of 1886 had an impact on Twain and the new manuscript he had begun in February. He had launched *Connecticut Yankee* largely as a project to make money. Two years had passed since the drafting of *Huckleberry Finn*, which had been a critical but not financial success, and income was a problem for him. Besides his own personal and family monetary needs, Twain was the main financial backer of two business ventures: the Charles L. Webster & Company publishing firm and James W. Paige's typesetting machine, both which required substantial amounts of operating capital. To be published by Webster, the new book, which Twain began as a "burlesque elaboration" of Thomas Malory's *Morte Darthur*, was designed to sell briskly and roll up a solid profit.⁴ This seemingly straight-forward plan soon ran into difficulties as Twain, in his attempt to write a humorous account of an American trying to reform Arthurian England, found the task less appealing than he had originally imagined. As the labor unrest and disorder occurred, especially the Haymarket Square tragedy, he struggled to resolve growing societal tensions within the story line of his manuscript. The writing stretched out over months, the words came more slowly, and finally, in 1887, he came to a halt, putting the work aside.

Meanwhile, Bellamy had responded differently than had Twain to the events of the previous year. Starting in the fall of 1886, he sought to draft a book that would direct attention toward a possible solution of "the labor problem." He hoped "to reason out a method of economic organization by which the republic might guarantee the livelihood and material welfare of its citizens on a basis of equality corresponding to and supplementing their political equality."⁵ The writing proceeded smoothly, with final copy ready for the publisher by the succeeding fall. He wrote with a clarity born of his own sense of social and

4 Justin Kaplan, *Mark Twain and His World* (New York, 1974), p. 142.

5 Edward Bellamy, "How and Why I Wrote *Looking Backward*," in Roemer, *America as Utopia*, pp. 24-25.

economic well-being formed in the security of Chicopee Falls. He also drew heavily upon the Northern experience during the Civil War, which had drawn the section together as nothing had previously, in creating the basis for a futuristic society. The ideal world he conceived was based on a common social ideology and a military regimen that Bellamy, though too young to have served in the war itself, had absorbed and come to admire. In *Looking Backward*, Bellamy wrote experientially, not so much of the technological conveniences described in the novel, but of moral authority and individual discipline, both which had shaped the direction and focus of his own efforts since childhood. The novel appeared in January of 1888 and quickly became a best seller, with 200,000 copies sold by the next year.

Meanwhile, after of year's pause, Twain resumed work on his manuscript, though the writing continued to be difficult and slow. For the next year, he revised and redrafted. During this period of time, as his biographers have shown, he struggled with the press of financial obligations and family concerns, particularly the growing frailty of his wife, Olivia. Other developments also held up the drafting of the book, including his preoccupation with the current labor disturbances. Twain lent his public reputation to the Knights of Labor and was distressed by the discrediting of the Knights in the aftermath of the Haymarket bombing. Like many of his literary peers, including William Howells, Charles Warner, George Washington Cable, and Henry and Brooks Adams, he spoke out on the economic and social injustices of the 1880s. All of these anxieties and concerns ate away at the base of his original plan for *Connecticut Yankee*, eventually producing, in the words of Justin Kaplan, "an extravagant, savagely conflicting book, at the same time an entertainment and a dark anarchic fable ... a lexicon of the concerns of its era."⁶ The tangled story of Hank Morgan came to embody the frustrations and confusion that Twain now sensed in a society tom by labor strife and growing violence. He was relieved to bring the manuscript to a conclusion and have it appear, in published form, in May of 1889.

In the meantime, *Looking Backward* had become a bestseller and was the subject of much discussion. The first Nationalist Clubs had formed and begun to agitate for a restructuring of American society along the lines laid down in Bellamy's narrative. Twain too was impressed. He shrugged off the sense of societal collapse that had overcome him in the drafting of *Connecticut Yankee* and seriously took up Bellamy's plan for social reform. In November, he began reading *Looking Backward*, calling it "fascinating." The following month, in a letter to William Howells, he referred to Bellamy as "the man who has made the accepted heaven paltry by inventing a better one on earth." Twain added that *Looking Backward* was "the latest and best of all the

6 Kaplan, *Mark Twain and His World*, p. 147.

Bibles.”⁷ His admiration led Twain to invite Bellamy to visit him in Hartford, which the latter did on January 1, 1890. Howells would later recall that Twain was visibly moved by “the vast wave of emotion sent over the world by *Looking Backward*.”⁸ The “wave of emotion” passed, however. Instead, old doubts and fears about human nature and societal disorder returned. He did not continue as an active supporter of Bellamy or the movement that *Looking Backward* had helped spawn.

In the coming decade, Bellamy and Twain would continue to act out contrasting responses to industrializing America. Made famous by the success of his novel, Bellamy became a social reformer, active in the Populist party, and a publicist for the Nationalist Clubs. He remained, until his death in 1897, convinced of the vision that he had articulated a decade earlier.

During the 1890s, Twain was preoccupied with recouping financial losses due to the collapse of the Warner publishing firm and the Paige typesetter project. To overcome his indebtedness, Twain returned to the lecture circuit, resuming his earlier globe-trotting expeditions. He grew increasingly bitter about life, especially after the death of his wife, and experienced a slumping faith in the human condition. By the time he died in 1910, Twain was in despair, incapable of the sense of hope that Bellamy's *Looking Backward* had, for a brief period, stirred within him.

The two novels that Bellamy and Twain wrote during the late 1880s, when juxtaposed with each other, still stand in sharp relief. Bellamy placed his novel in the future, while Twain looked backward. In choosing 2000 A.D., Bellamy led the reader to envision the possibility of evolutionary change, to envision what was possible if the correct objectives were pursued. There is hope that, given time, the crisis of the 1880s would pass and a better world constructed. On the other hand, *Connecticut Yankee* conveys a sense of the historical finality. In *Camelot*, the author would have the reader imagine that a great experiment had once unfolded, which attempted then to implant a way of life only now emerging in the late nineteenth century. The attempt came up short and the results were cataclysmic. The failed past, even in the form of a fable, has tainted the present and provided a warning for the present generation of Americans.

In *Looking Backward*, Edward Bellamy embraced modernity while Mark Twain, in his dystopian narrative, found it wanting. Boston in 2000 A.D. incorporated all the most advanced technical achievements, including some that were yet to be developed. Mass systems of distribution prevailed, complete with credit cards. There were such luxuries as piped-in music and vast enclosed spaces free of the elements of nature. The novel advanced the image

⁷ Henry Nash Smith and William M. Gibson, eds., *Mark Twain - Howells Letters*, Vol. II (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1960), p. 622 (footnote 2).

⁸ Smith and Gibson, eds., *Twain - Howells Letters*, Vol. II, p. 622.

of a centrally organized, completely egalitarian, and materially abundant world.

In his attempt to reform Arthurian England, Hank Morgan sought to bring about similar reforms. He sought to implement nineteenth-century technology as a way of quickly raising the medieval standard of living. Morgan had been shocked to find himself in a society that had no soap, no matches, no mirrors, no candles, no books, no pens, no ink, no glass, no sugar, no coffee, no tobacco, and no "speaking tubes" or chromolithographs. He soon organized factories and a distribution system, including an extensive advertising campaign, to achieve his goal of modernization. He miscalculated, however, and his mistakes led to chaos and disorientation. The sixth century turned against his efforts, rejecting the fast-paced process of change that the Yankee has unleashed. In the end, this earlier world, and its pastoral setting, was destroyed by the arms technology of the modern world. Induced into a deep sleep by Merlin, Hank Morgan alone survived the centuries to carry a message to the 1880s and succeeding generations: that modernity, taken to an extreme, can undermine the stability and balance of human society.⁹

Looking Backward and *Connecticut Yankee* also reflect conflicting views of government centralization. For Bellamy, the concentrating of government, economy, and society was the key to a better way of life, the path away from the old tensions and inequalities of the 1880s. A national "industrial army," overseen and led by "experts," would constitute the new, and long needed, authoritarian structure for modern society, an interpretation that Arthur Lipow has attempted to demonstrate in his study of *Looking Backward*.¹⁰

In *Connecticut Yankee*, Twain rejected the development of a centralized government, resisting the claims of absolute monarchy, as he envisioned them. Hank Morgan attempted to encourage self-reliance and the advancement of group interests, such as urging the peasants to organize in their own behalf. The Yankee also spent considerable time attempting to overcome the lack of understanding and sympathy shown by King Arthur toward his subjects, which the transplanted American believed was a common characteristic of centralized authority. Morgan desired, after King Arthur's death, to see a republican form of government emerge, within which different constituent groups could affirm, and fight for, their interests. This enlightened goal was soon engulfed and lost in the terrible consequences of Morgan's actions in defending himself.

9 William Dean Howells, "My Mark Twain," in *Literary Friends and Acquaintance* (Bloomington, Indiana, 1968), edited by David F. Hiatt and Edwin H. Cady, pp. 283, 307-308. In this essay, Howells wrote of his old friend: "No one can read *The Connecticut Yankee* and not be aware of the length and breadth of his sympathies with poverty, but apparently he had not thought out any scheme for righting the economic wrongs we abound in."

10 Arthur Lipow, *Authoritarian Socialism in America* (Berkeley, California, 1982), pp. 24-29.

Twain's dystopic fable was meant partly to show that centralized government often hinders, rather than advances, the social and cultural stability of a nation.

These sharp differences in perspective confirm that Twain, while drawn at one point to Bellamy's nationalist ideology, was not convinced that genuine social change was ever really possible. His critics from William Dean Howells to Everett Emerson concur in this judgment. Frederick E. Pratter, for example, in placing *Connecticut Yankee* in the context of the Bellamy-inspired era of utopian writing, has commented on the strains within the main character in the text: "In going back to Camelot and trying to grow up with the new country, Hank is attempting to assert the Promethean ideal, the capacity of an individual to effect change in his world. That the attempt is a failure indicates how for Twain the disintegration of safety and stability, the two props of the ideal sensibility in post-Civil War America, had become a major concern. By the end of his life, this concern was to amount almost to an obsession."¹¹ The financial pressures, personal concerns, and social anxieties that Twain experienced during this period directly affected the drafting of his manuscript.

When compared critically, *Looking Backward* and *Connecticut Yankee* function as contrasting cultural artifacts from an era of social dislocation and cultural conflict. One remains a clear, untroubled vision of the future, the other a murky, deeply disturbed exploration of the past. Both books remind us how far apart reform-minded Americans could be over the essential import of the social and economic crises of the 1880s. In their respective works of fiction, Edward Bellamy and Mark Twain projected vastly different assessments of technology and modernity, and their implications for American society. Each sought to approach the problems of the era from outside their own time, to find in the future and the past insights that seemed absent from the present.

11 Frederick E. Pratter, "The Mysterious Traveler in the Speculative Fiction of Howells and Twain," in *America As Utopia*, p. 81.