

Individual Learning Packet

Teaching Unit

A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court

by Mark Twain

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Notes

First published in 1889, *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* is Mark Twain's last full-length novel. It is a satire that pokes fun at knight-errantry and chivalry as they are described in Thomas Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur*. While there are many classic Twain-like humorous incidents in this story, Twain also uses this novel to express his views on serious topics such as the horrors of slavery, the power of the Catholic Church, the flaws in a monarchy, and the inescapable defects in human nature.

All references come from the Dover Thrift Edition of *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, published 2001.

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Objectives

By the end of this Unit, the student will be able to:

1. define vocabulary words from the text including vocabulary words relating to life in sixth-century England.
2. discuss the author's humorous use of satire to mock knight-errantry, the Catholic church, and the nobility.
3. recognize the following satirical devices in the story:
 - using understatement and/or overstatement to poke fun at a person or institution
 - using sarcasm to say one thing but mean another
 - distorting the facts to highlight the flaws in a person or institution.
4. discuss the following themes relating to government:
 - Democracy is the best form of government for ensuring justice for the common man.
 - In a hereditary monarchy, titled men and women are often unworthy of the respect of the commoners.
 - The romantic notion of knight-errantry needs to be recognized as foolishness.
5. cite incidents from the story to illustrate the following theme: A powerful central church favors the privileged nobility and takes advantage of the common man.
6. discuss the following themes relating to human nature:
 - Much of a man's behavior and thinking is determined by his training and is rarely examined by the light of reason.
 - Inhumanity, injustice, and barbarity remain part of human existence, despite man's attempt to civilize behavior with a code of laws.
7. cite incidents from the story to illustrate the struggle that takes place between the powers of superstition and the powers of rational thought.

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Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. List four ways Camelot as described in this story differs from the near-perfect, idyllic Camelot described in books and movies about King Arthur.
2. Write a three-paragraph essay comparing Hank to Merlin. Cite incidents from the story and consider the following in your answer:
 - the level of power each possesses to perform magic
 - the control or influence each has over the people of Camelot
 - whether or not each wields his power responsibly and for the welfare of the people.
3. Write a character sketch of King Arthur. Include a discussion of the following:
 - how he views slavery and how these opinions change as the story progresses
 - how he views the rights of the privileged nobility
 - how he is perceived by his people
 - how he is perceived by Hank.
4. Write a paragraph in which you define an “anti-climax” and discuss how the conclusion to Sandy’s and Hank’s adventure is anticlimactic.
5. Write a paragraph describing the most humorous incident you remember in this novel, including what you think the incident is satirizing.
6. Write a paragraph describing the most moving or sad incident you remember in the novel, including what theme(s) you think Twain is illustrating by including it in this otherwise humorous tale.
7. Discuss the ending of this story. Why do you think Twain ends the tale with a terrible war? What is he saying about human nature with this ending?
8. Cite three incidents in the story that support Twain’s view that a powerful central church favors the privileged nobility and unjustly takes advantage of the common man.
9. Find and discuss an excerpt in the text illustrating each of the following satirical techniques:
 - using understatement and/or overstatement to poke fun at a person or institution
 - using sarcasm to say one thing and mean another
 - distorting the facts in order to highlight the flaws in a person or an institution.

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Introduction

Vocabulary

anon – soon, shortly
beguile – mislead
cicerone – a guide who explains the history and chief features of a place to sightseers
clave – divided by a blow, as with an ax; split
courtelage – archaic of cottage
covenant – a binding and solemn agreement
epoch – a period of time considered in terms of noteworthy and characteristic events
espied – caught sight of
garret – a space, room, or rooms just below the roof of a house
hauberk – a medieval coat of armor, usually of chain mail
holpen – archaic form of help
loth – unwilling
palimpsest – a parchment that has been written upon
prodigious – of great size, power, extent
seneschal – a steward in a medieval household
smote – hit or struck hard; attacked with powerful or disastrous effect
strake – archaic form of strike
transmigration – the act of the soul passing into another body at death
Whitsunday – the seventh Sunday after Easter, Pentecost

1. Where does the author first meet the stranger? List three reasons the author is intrigued by this strange American.

2. Why does the stranger describe himself as “a Yankee of Yankees”? What is his profession?

Chapter XII: Slow Torture

Vocabulary

sylvan – characteristic of the woods or forest

1. In this chapter, Twain satirizes knighthood by exaggerating for the reader every discomfort a knight can experience on a quest. Some of his descriptions of THE BOSS in his armor are hilarious and memorable. Find a passage in the chapter describing the discomfort(s) THE BOSS suffers that you find to be the most amusing.

Chapter XX: The Ogre's Castle

Vocabulary

bunco – a swindle
declivity – a downward slope
dolorous – very sorrowful or sad; mournful
leonine – like a lion
limpid – perfectly clear; transparent
lubber – a big, slow, clumsy person
perversity – deviating from what is considered right or good
predilections – preconceived likings or preferences
prophylactic – preventive or protective against disease

1. Some critics refer to this chapter as being anticlimactic. An anticlimax occurs when a story that is building suspense or interest in an event suddenly reveals the anticipated event to be trivial. The result is that the reader's anticipation is spoiled. Comment on whether or not you believe the events in this chapter are anticlimactic. Cite incidents from the story to support your conclusion.
