Twainiac Conservatism

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Discussing the life and contributions of Mark Twain in the same breath as American conservative thought would at first consideration seem to do a disservice to both. First, any such labeling likely would not be welcomed by one of the country's most famously dyspeptic writers, because Twain had neither the habit nor inclination to write in theoretical terms. Quite the opposite in fact: Indeed, his notorious introduction to *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn,* which Ernest Hemingway once said constituted the source for all American literature, seems to say it all: "Persons attempting to find a motive in this narrative will be prosecuted; persons attempting to find a moral in it will be banished; persons attempting to find a plot in it will be shot." What about persons attempting to extricate elements of political thought in anything else that Twain wrote? Consequences would seem to be dire. Readers of *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* understand that beheadings, burnings at the stake, or being impaled by Knights-Errant certainly are reasonable punishments for anyone seeking to find a political *theory* in any of Twain's writings.[1] Certainly his fans over the decades have understood that the old curmudgeon, who is the object of their literary affections, did not suffer fools gladly; witness the fates of those who crossed paths with any of the famous characters in his books, especially *Tom Sawyer* or *Huckleberry Finn.*

> ***How empty is theory in presence of fact!***
>
> ***A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*** (1)

[1] Mark Twain, *Mark Twain at Your Fingertips*, ed. Caroline Thomas Harnsberger, 115 (New York: Dover, 2009). Unless otherwise noted, all textbox quotations are taken from this source.

Further, lumping Mark Twain together with such luminaries as Edmund Burke, James Madison, William F. Buckley, and dozens of others in the pantheon of conservative thinkers would seem to disparage their contributions by mere association; after all, even a novelist of Twain's reputation could hardly be said to enhance our grasp of conservative principles since about the most he ever said about what is near and dear to their hearts was to include among his *Letters from the Earth* several pointed aspersions against "the damned human race."[2] Though John Calvin or Jonathan Edwards likely would not wince at such a characterization, America's founding fathers and their conservative progeny, whose skepticism about human nature constitutes the foundation of all other philosophical principles, might suggest that Twain's view takes matters a bit too far. After all, if humanity is that irredeemable, how can one engage in a serious discussion about the great principles of constitutional government, such as the separation of powers, federalism, enumerated powers, democratic accountability, and numerous other topics indispensable to past and current political debates? In short, what could an exploration of Mark Twain's writings possibly contribute to our understanding of conservative political thought?

Reader, suppose you were an idiot. And suppose you were a member of Congress. But I repeat myself.

Mark Twain, A Biography

The answer is quite a bit, especially considering the totality of Mark Twain's life and the observations he made about his experiences along the way. Indeed, experience is the key; clearly everything Twain wrote reflects John Dickenson's famous utterance made during the debates at the Constitutional Convention in 1887: "Let experience be our guide; reason may mislead us." The single most important thing about Mark Twain is that he was never misguided by reason, or rather, by the "artful misrepresentations of interested men," to use James Madison's felicitous

[2] Mark Twain, *Letters from the Earth,* ed. Bernard DeVito, 219-243 (New York: HarperCollins, 2004). See also Mark Twain, *The Bible According to Mark Twain,* eds. Howard G. Baetzhold and Joseph B. McCullough (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996).

phrase in *Federalist Sixty-Three*. Quite the contrary: Mark Twain made it his specialty to pierce the posturing of others, to deflate pomposity wherever he found it, to expose the pretentiousness of "reason" and charlatanism for fun and profit from coast to coast, from the deserts of North Africa to the swamps of South Asia, from the streets of London to the shores of Central America, and everywhere in between. In fact, the experiences recounted in Twain's *Innocents Abroad* demonstrate that he was anything but innocent about the realities and frequent absurdities of life on planet earth. This is the first and most salient point about Twain's contributions to conservative thought in America: Life must be lived to be understood, to be written about, to qualify an individual for rendering advice to others.

The second is Twain's rather jaundiced view of human nature, which likely was exaggerated throughout most of his writings, until the very end when his long, hard life deepened his cynicism about presumptions of human goodness or altruism, as evidenced in his lugubrious treatment of humanity's prospects in *The Mysterious Stranger*. This cynicism fed especially his distrust of experts to the point of parody, which is the third point that we shall pursue in the following short stories: "Story of a Bad Little Boy"; "Journalism in Tennessee"; "How I Edited an Agricultural Paper"; "My Watch"; and "The McWilliamses and the Burglar Alarm." Twain concluded that the isolated mentalities of experts could never qualify them to understand how individuals really interact with one another, how people use each other and swindle each other in order to attain selfish ends, which is the fourth theme in Twain's short stories that we shall pursue. Often his narratives are humorous, such as "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County" and a bevy of short stories collected in a book that recounts the happiest times he ever experienced, *Life on the Mississippi*. Other tales are darker in nature, reflecting the tragic condition of human beings, such as "A Burning Brand," "A Curious Experience," and

"Cannibalism in the Cars." The fifth and final theme we shall deal with centers on Twain's profound treatment of the uncertainties in life; unpredictable events, tragic mistakes or accidents that often have dire effects; in short, the radical contingencies of human existence that escape the attention of the most brilliant thinkers who mistakenly believe that all life can somehow be neatly captured in a theory. Likely it is this last point that singles out Mark Twain as a deeply conservative thinker, one whose days from the time of his birth in 1835 to his death in 1910 were filled with penetrating observations about many hundreds of characters who only a fool would think could be reduced to an all-encompassing or prescriptive political formula. In short, Twain believed that blueprints are for experts and other dimwits, while experiences are for the rest of us whose journeys in life take many unpredictable turns.

Experience is an author's most valuable asset; experience is the thing that puts the muscle and the breath and the warm blood into the book he writes.
What is Man? And other Essays (1917)

And a very full life Mark Twain had indeed, enough to pack the lifespans of several dozen people he encountered and wrote about along the way, individuals whose occupations consumed the entirety of their activities but constituted only a portion of what Twain himself was able to accomplish. Thus, Twain, as Samuel Clemens, spent four years as a Mississippi River pilot where he also adopted the name for which he later was to become famous, plunged into gold prospecting in Nevada, traded in stocks (usually unsuccessfully), dabbled with inventions of various sorts, especially an elaborate

I have been an author for 20 years and an ass for 55.

Mark Twain's Letters, Vol. II

typesetting machine that eventually forced him into bankruptcy, became part-owner of several newspapers and wrote for several dozen more, dabbled in real estate, challenged one of his critics to a duel but skipped town before his antagonist showed up, wrote a pair of hoaxes that got him into trouble ("A Bloody Massacre Near Carson," and "The Petrified Man"), traveled throughout the country and the world delivering lectures to sold-out music halls. He met and exchanged thoughts with dozens of luminaries of his era, including monarchs such as Kaiser Wilhelm and the Russian Czar, writers such as Charles Dickens, Bret Harte, and William Dean Howells, a few presidents, especially Ulysses S. Grant, and assorted millionaires, one of whom bailed him out of one of his disastrous business ventures. Throughout all of which he lamented "On the Decay of the Art of Lying," and tried briefly on numerous occasions to give up smoking, drinking, lying and swearing, but couldn't. The best he managed was to control his drinking and write an essay that was "An Appeal Against *Injudicious* Swearing," which is as far as he would go on this very important topic. After all, a man needs something to keep himself going when you're doing all that stuff.[3]

> ***I was always told that I was a sickly and precarious and tiresome and uncertain child, and lived mainly on allopathic medicines during the first seven years of my life. I asked my mother about this, in her old age—she was in her eighty-eighth year—and said:***
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> ***"I suppose that during all that time you were uneasy about me?"***
>
> ***"Yes, the whole time."***
>
> ***"Afraid I wouldn't live?"***
>
> ***After a reflective pause—ostensibly to think out the facts—"No—afraid that you would."***
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> ***Mark Twain's Autobiography, Vol I.***

Twain also was intimately acquainted with life's tragedies, several of which found their way into his books. His sister Margaret died of "bilious fever" in 1839, and his brother Benjamin succumbed to an unspecified illness in 1842; young Samuel himself, who had always been

[3] Information about Mark Twain's life is drawn from Ron Powers, *Mark Twain, A Life* (New York: Free Press, 2005), and Fred Kaplan, *The Singular Mark Twain* (New York: Anchor, 2003).

sickly, survived a bout of self-inflicted measles, along with a host of nostrums his mother used to try to improve his health, which included castor oil, rhubarb, jalap, various poultices and water treatments, and socks filled with hot ashes. At age ten, Twain saw a man die in a gunfight and stumbled upon a corpse in his father's office; he witnessed a doctor performing a post-mortem on his father in 1846 and watched helplessly as one of his friends died from drowning the following year. He gave matches to a drunk who proceeded to set his jail cell on fire where he burned himself to death, and advised his dear brother Henry to join him on his Mississippi adventures, only to discover that the younger Clemens, who stayed on the boat that Samuel had left, was badly burned in a boiler explosion and later died, with Twain at his bedside. Further to compound that grief that lingered with him throughout his life, Mark Twain outlived his wife and all but one of his four children, one of whom died while he was overseas. Add to these traumas his own depression, on occasion approaching suicidal levels, and various ailments that plagued him during his adult life, including gout, rheumatism, pneumonia, carbuncles and bronchitis—all of which became disabling at various times. In short, from murders to accidental deaths, from Calcutta to Cairo, from Naples to Nevada, from London to Hawaii, and from Australia to Jackass Hill in California, Mark Twain had seen it all, and this is the first and most salient point about his place in a conservative's understanding of America: Mark Twain had a sumptuously full life—indeed, the sort of life that only an American could have—and his life formed his beliefs.

If you pick up a starving dog and make him prosperous, he will not bite you. This is the principal difference between a dog and a man.
Pudd'nhead Wilson

And he wrote about it all, based on a view of human nature, the second principle of Twain's conservatism, that at best can be described as skeptical, at worst, misanthropic. Twain's

bleak perspective on humanity's proclivities and prospects seeps through his writings like malevolent shadows through a patchwork of badly stitched shreds of cloth that fray at the edges when his cynicism gets out of control; his pessimism is usually present and at best reveals itself in nothing more than sarcasm, and at worst as mordant despair. Thus, in "The Character of Man," an essay that summarizes thoughts found throughout much of his work, Twain quips "that he [man] was not made for any useful purpose, for the reason that he hasn't served any; that he was most likely not even made *intentionally*; and that his working himself up out of the oyster bed to his present position was probably a matter of surprise and regret to the Creator."[4] Further, humans are needlessly malicious, delight in inflicting pain, kill for fun, and are inherently bigoted and selfish; even acts of so-called altruism can be traced to egocentric motives, in that the hero in question simply preferred self-aggrandizement by deferring to the needs of others as opposed to the dictates of self-interest. Twain concluded by asserting that "a man is what he is," a "buzzing, busy, trivial enemy of his race—who tarries his little day, does his little dirt, commends himself to God, and then goes out into the darkness, to return no more, and send no messages back—selfish even in death."[5] In short, humanity is a pretty sorry lot, and there's nothing anyone can do about it.

Even pretense doesn't work, as Twain demonstrated in one of his more biting short stories, "The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg," a tale involving a vengeful visitor to a town that prided itself in its incorruptibility. Acting on a perceived slight, a "passing stranger" carries out an extremely clever con job against all the town's inhabitants, by promising a great financial reward to that single person who had supposedly befriended him during his brief visit; but actually the stranger's stratagem is aimed at exposing the sham that constituted Hadleyburg's

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[4] Mark Twain, *Collected Tales, Sketches, Speeches & Essays 1852-1890*, ed. Louis J. Budd, 884 (New York: Library of America, 1992).
[5] Twain, *Collected Tales*, 858.

exalted opinion of itself. In this task the stranger succeeds brilliantly by putting the town's citizens through a cutthroat process of ferreting out the identity of that single individual, and along the way exposing the meretricious character of everyone caught up in the scheme. Pressed by hope and desperation, one of the citizens expresses the true nature of Hadleyburg's people in a diatribe aimed at her naïve and stupid husband: "…It is my belief that this town's honesty is as rotten as mine is; as rotten as yours is. It is a mean town, a hard, stingy town, and hasn't a virtue in the world but this honesty it is so celebrated for and is so conceited about; and so help me, I do believe that if ever the day comes that its honesty falls under great temptation, its grand reputation will go to ruin like a house of cards."[6] A better metaphor for Twain's views on the foibles of human nature can hardly be found.

But it is also true that Twain talked tougher than he was, at least with regard to his frequent animadversions against what he regarded as those pitiful creatures that the almighty, perhaps in a fit of absent-mindedness or pique, decided to populate the earth with, for its conquest and their amusement. In fact, Twain's acerbic comments about his fellow man constituted a sort of moral gruel that was far too thin to cover the plenitude of experiences he had with others, and in many cases, explains none of them at all. For instance, Twain was an excellent father, doted constantly on the tribulations of his children, and plummeted into depression at their misfortunes and deaths. He also demonstrated considerable charity, along with a sense of justice, against those most reviled of personages who made his life miserable, his creditors—though also at the instigation of his excellent wife Livy, who saw fit to pierce her husband's cynicism with a lance of moral clarity. Like them or not, she insisted, their creditors needed to be paid back, dollar for dollar, what Twain owed them. So he paid them back, by earning enough money on a whirlwind global tour that took him literally from one end of the

[6] Mark Twain, *The Complete Short Stories of Mark Twain*, ed. Charles Neider, 360-61 (New York: Bantam, 1957).

planet to the other, starting in Australia, stopping off in India and South Africa, and ending in England. Finally, there were several people with whom Twain developed very close friendships, such as William Dean Howells and Henry Huttleston Rogers, vice-president and director of the Standard Oil Company and also a benefactor of extravagant generosity, prompting his cynical charge that he was the only human being that Twain gave a damn for.[7] But this spurt of appreciation, expressed during a very low time in his financial fortunes, also understates the famous author's commitment to others, and in fact, by the time he departed for his world tour, he had accumulated quite a number of close acquaintances who appreciated his friendship as much as he cherished theirs.

The exception to this rule was a particular category of humanity for whom Twain held a life-long disdain, and which also may be understood as constituting the third principle of his curmudgeonly conservatism. Twain distrusted experts; more to the point, he hated them and thought that self-appointed experts in particular were just too "full of themselves" and with that other well known bovine effluent that peppered his descriptions of them in discreet circles. His greatest scorn was reserved for those who had the temerity to question his writing, especially his punctuation. For instance, when reading the proofs for *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, he discovered to his profane outrage that an editor, an expert in the writing profession, a "peerless imported proof-reader from Oxford University," had altered a few of his favorite placements, Twain fired back with "an exhibition [that] was not suited to any Sunday school." Twain elaborated: "I said I didn't care if he was an Archangel imported from Heaven, he couldn't puke his ignorant impudence over *my* punctuation, I wouldn't allow it for a moment."[8] In this matter, as in many others, Twain was his own expert and didn't need the advice of others.

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[7] Powers, *Twain, A Life*, 562.
[8] Powers, *Twain, A Life*, 556.

This view is found in several of his more humorous short stories. For instance, in a piquant little missive entitled simply "My Watch," Twain explains how something that was only moderately problematic to begin with was made very much worse by an expert, in this case, a master watchmaker and fixer. All Twain needed was for the watch to be reset, as he had by mistake let it run down before rewinding it. That's when his frustrations began. The first watchmaker he consulted explained that the "regulator" needed to be adjusted, which he proceeded to do and which further led to Twain's marvelous timepiece becoming so ruinously slow that his own life practically ran in reverse; indeed, he missed appointments by days, then weeks, then months, then years, and finally entire historical eras: "I seemed to detect in myself a sort of sneaking fellow-feeling for the mummy in the museum, and a desire to swap news with him."[9]A follow-up trip to a different expert in watch repair resulted in a timepiece that kept up "such a barking and wheezing and whooping and sneezing and snorting, that [he] could not hear himself think."[10] Subsequent trips to different experts in watch repair made things go from bad to worse, as various parts were fixed, replaced, discarded, or bent back into what was supposed to be a fully

> *…any calm person, who is not blind or idiotic, can see that in the Old Oolitic Silurian Period, just a million years ago next November, the Lower Mississippi River was upward of one million three hundred thousand miles long, and stuck out over the Gulf of Mexico like a fishing-rod. And by the same token any person can see that seven hundred and forty-two years from now the Lower Mississippi will be only a mile and three-quarters long, and Cairo and New Orleans will have joined their streets together, and be plodding comfortably along under a single major and a mutual board of aldermen. There is something fascinating about science. One gets such wholesale returns of conjecture out of such a trifling investment of fact.*
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> *Life on the Mississippi*

[9] Twain, *Complete Short Stories,* 57.
[10] Twain, *Complete Short Stories,* 57.

functioning shape until the hour and minute hands grasped each other in a scissors-like death grip that resulted in their traveling around the numbers together. The last expert Twain consulted was a failed steamboat engineer who reported confidently that this delicate little piece of machinery produced too much steam and needed to have a monkey-wrench hang on its safety-valve, an item not part of any watch. To which the exasperated owner of the watch said: "I brained him on the spot, and had him buried at my own expense."[11] So much for putting one's faith in experts, especially those who, as far as he knew, didn't own watches themselves.

This tale is brilliantly told and needs to be read in full in order really to be appreciated, which is also the case with Twain's other caustic short stories about experts. Thus, in "The McWilliamses and the Burglar Alarm," which was recounted to Twain "with ill-controlled emotion," an exasperated Mr. McWilliams succumbed to his wife's entreaties by agreeing to purchase a burglar alarm at the cost of $325, and this permitted them to sleep well at night.[12] Until, that is, the first burglar showed up, smoking a pipe no less, to which the owner objected on the basis of his no smoking rule, then relinquished the point while saying to the intruder "Smoke along, then, if it is the custom, though I think that the conceding of a privilege to a burglar which is denied to a bishop is a conspicuous sign of the looseness of the times."[13]

> ***My uncle William…used to say that a good horse was a good horse until it had run away once, and that a good watch was a good watch until the repairers got a chance at it.***
>
> ***"My Watch"***

Further inquiries revealed that the burglar, who fortunately turned out to be a very civilized and agreeable fellow, had gained admittance through a second story window, which resulted in Mr. McWilliams consulting the burglar alarm experts again to remedy that defect by

[11] Twain, *Complete Short Stories*, 59.
[12] Twain, *Complete Short Stories,* 193.
[13] Twain, *Complete Short Stories,* 193.

securing the second story as well—at the cost of an additional $300. Subsequent misadventures by equally accommodating intruders resulted in more expertly installed deterrent devices at additional amounts of $300 a pop; unfortunately, three or four hundred false alarms triggered by the progressively sophisticated and expensive system resulted ultimately in the owner disassembling the entire complex, for which he was rewarded by burglars who then invaded his home and stole all the burglar alarm machinery itself—mostly for the elaborate and expensive wiring involved. Mrs. McWilliams finally conceded her husband's point by allowing him to resort to that most old fashioned and time-tested method of preventing burglary: He purchased a dog, which he subsequently shot for unexplained reasons. The point of this story is that every time experts applied their supposed skills to a problem, at considerable expense, *they made matters worse.* Twain's message is clear: Don't trust experts.

Perhaps the most important reason for this advice is that one does not have to be an expert in order to pose as one, and further, that the most dangerous kind of specialist is the one who, in fact, knows nothing about the subject in question but feels no compunction about rendering advice regardless. Twain's exploration of this problem is found in four other stories, in his hilarious "How I Edited an Agricultural Paper," and, more darkly, in "The Story of the Bad Little Boy," as well as in "The Story of the Good Little Boy," and finally in his book-length treatment about the adverse consequences of applying superior knowledge to a society that resists it, *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court.* The progression here is from humor to tragedy, from a light-hearted touch on pretentiousness to the catastrophes produced when people fail to grasp the difference between thinking and doing; between, if you will, the hubris of theory to the burdens of practice, to the tragic realities of life.

Naturally, the lighthearted treatments are the most fun to read, and nothing surpasses Twain's overview of journalistic expertise in his account of "How I Edited an Agricultural Paper," a position he acquired by that most Twainiac of methods, pure luck. Twain's efforts were not exactly appreciated by an elderly editor who in Twain's view took unwarranted exception to everything he wrote. Thus, the eager young journalist felt his elder's sting of criticism for writing about the moulting season for cows, exercising care when picking turnips from trees lest one injure their fragile skins, dismissing pumpkin plants because they make poor shade trees, recommending the domestication of pole cats because of their "playful nature" and superb skills in catching rats, and finally, how playing music to clams has a soothing effect on their dispositions, which the senior editor angrily dismissed on the grounds that it was "superfluous."[14] Twain bristled in response, by asseverating that this "was the first time [he] ever heard of a man's having to know anything in order to edit a newspaper."[15] Further, the indignant Twain pointed out truths that likely have applied to many journalists and editors since his time as well:

> *I am not the editor of a newspaper and shall always try to do right and be good so that God will not make me one.*
> *- Galaxy magazine, December 1870*
>
> *Twainquotes.com*

> Who review the books? People who never wrote one. Who do up the heavy leaders on finance? Parties who have had the largest opportunities for knowing nothing about it. Who criticize the Indian campaigns? [This essay was published in 1870.] Gentlemen who do not know a war-whoop from a wigwam… Who write the temperance

[14] Twain, *Complete Short Stories,* 45-50.
[15] Twain, *Complete Short Stories,* 49.

appeals, and clamor about the flowing bowl? Folks who will never draw another sober breath till they do it in the grave.[16]

Thus, it would seem that even not knowing anything about the subject matter should not, in the case of editors, at least, dissuade one from writing about it.

More important from Twain's perspective is how one acquires knowledge about anything, because knowing nothing can be equivalent to knowing something, depending on the source of one's knowledge. For instance, in "The Story of the Good Little Boy," Twain points out the uselessness of "book learning" applied to real-life situations, where reality intrudes constantly to frustrate the expectations of those who formed their views about how the world works solely from what others had written about it.

Golden Rule: Made of hard metal so it could stand severe wear, it not being known at that time that butter would answer.
- More Maxims of Mark, Johnson, (1927)
Twainquotes.com

The books young Jacob Blivens read always praised the rewards attained by good boys and showed punishments awaiting the bad ones, a narrative that constituted life's template for him, even though all his personal experiences demonstrated the opposite of what he read. This meant that in the real world bad boys prospered regardless of their mischievous acts and downright evil deeds, and a good boy like himself always got the raw end of the deal, right to the last good act of his life when he was blown to smithereens by explosives attached by bad boys to fifteen dogs he was trying to save from them—too late as it turned out: "…That good little boy shot out through the roof and soared away toward the sun, with the fragments of those fifteen dogs stringing after him like the tail of a kite," Twain observed.[17] Twain made the same argument from the opposite point of view

[16] Twain, *Complete Short Stories,* 49.
[17] Twain, *Complete Short Stories,* 70.

in “The Story of the Bad Little Boy” named Jim, who prospered regardless of the bad things he did: “…Everything turned out differently with him from the way it does to the bad Jameses in the books,” Twain’s narrator observed.[18] The Sunday School books were always wrong, and in fact, “there never was a bad James in the Sunday School books that had such a streak of luck as this sinful Jim with the charmed life.”[19] This is as much to say that virtuous behavior had better be its own reward, because events in actual life offer scant recompense for those who try to do the right thing based on expert moral advice they’ve read in books.

Twain’s most convincing display of his suspicion for experts is found in his book-length treatment of what can happen even when knowledge gained through hard experience is applied to the wrong circumstances, as is the case in *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court.* In this account an unquestionably superior understanding based on modern expertise is applied to the wrong historical time, which means that Twain actually overloaded an argument that justifies expert dominance over the rest of humanity, only to conclude that a social system based on the superiority of a gifted few is destroyed in the end.

The storyline has become a part of American literary culture and is a familiar one. After recovering from a blow to the head, Hank Morgan, a nineteenth-century expert in firearms and machinery, finds himself inexplicably transported to King Arthur’s Court in sixth-century England. For a man with his knowledge, this situation presents the opportunity of a lifetime: “I would boss the whole country inside of three months; for I judged that I would have the start of the best educated man in the kingdom by a matter of thirteen hundred years and upward.”[20] Morgan’s less than enlightened view of his amazing circumstances and his unique place in that primitive society generates a number of extraordinary and convoluted adventures, the most

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[18] Twain, *Complete Short Stories,* 7.
[19] Twain, *Complete Short Stories,* 9.
[20] Mark Twain, *Selected Works* (New York: Gramercy, 1982), 500.

famous and best known of which has him taking advantage of a solar eclipse that coincidentally took place just in time for him to take credit for it and thereby overawe the superstitious and easily impressed observers. After that, Morgan, as "the Boss," found it necessary to keep up his reputation by performing magical tricks now and then—using guns and explosives and other nineteenth-century wonder weapons—as he creates a sort of subterranean industrial revolution that he hopes will secure his power to rule indefinitely. And after all, why shouldn't he expect to enjoy unlimited rule by virtue of his own century's equivalent to divine right—with its science and machinery and a plethora of fancy gadgets—to keep the sixth century peasants in line?

> *...there are some things that can beat smartness and foresight. Awkwardness and stupidity can. The best swordsman in the world doesn't need to fear the second best swordsman in the world; no, the person for him to be afraid of is some ignorant antagonist who has never had a sword in his hand before; he doesn't do the thing he ought to do, and so the expert isn't prepared for him.*
> *- A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*
> *Twainquotes.com*

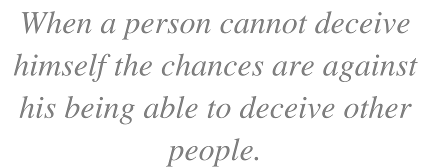
In fact, "peasants" is the kindest designation that Twain's main character uses for his subjects, about whom he also refers as "simple-hearted creatures," not much more exalted than animals and at their best, perhaps rabbits—all of which represent the kind of supercilious view that elites have had toward their supposed inferiors from Old Testament times to the present. At all events, it appeared that near the end of his tenure, about three years later, the Boss had succeeded in transforming English society in ways that made it resemble the most advanced features of late nineteenth century America, complete with electricity, factories, railroads, phonographs, typewriters, sewing machines and steamboats. But these things actually constituted a veneer over a society that remained ready to catapult back to its settled ways at the earliest opportunity, and

this came shortly after Morgan found it necessary to take a leave of absence to care for his sick child. Bad idea: he returned to find that his old nemesis, the Catholic Church, had placed the entire realm under interdict, which resulted in a civil war where the Boss was left with only a few dozen supporters, whose assistance, along with thirteen Gatling guns, enabled him to slaughter twenty-five thousand attackers against his fortified cave. The Boss's last act was to succumb to Merlin's last spell, which put this modern expert to sleep for thirteen centuries and thereby return him to the future.

This synopsis, of course, fails to do justice to a novel that is filled with stupendous events and Mark Twain's trademark humor, and usually has been interpreted as Twain's petulant rant against the machine age and lingering aspects of medieval culture that he despised, such as knighthoods and chivalry. But *A Connecticut Yankee* is more than that; indeed, Twain's analysis suggests that if a superior being with a millennium's advantage of expertise over what he regards as a backward society cannot make it right, then probably the task cannot be done at all. In short, don't expect experts like watch fixers, burglar alarm specialists, agricultural paper editors, Sunday school teachers, or savants of modern machinery to solve your problems for you; that is a task best left to individuals who struggle to get the right answers for themselves by grappling with the continued hard lessons of experience. This is the third principal theme that qualifies Mark Twain as a conservative, particularly in terms of his temperament.

Another reason to distrust experts is that likely they don't have your welfare in mind anyway; only their self-aggrandizement matters, especially for those well practiced in the art of swindling or in the lures of the con game. The fourth theme that emerges from a review of Twain's writings is the constant vigilance we all need for self-protection against the schemes of swindlers, charlatans, and con artists, a most apposite warning for our modern era that is

practically defined by such things. Now some of his accounts are simply humorous and trigger smiles of appreciation at the ingenuity or absurdity of the perpetrators—consider Tom Sawyer's clever white-washing-the-fence ploy or Huck Finn's encounter with the king of France. Others, found in his short stories, challenge readers with a more serious message that leaves one grateful to have learned from the master about those sorts of characters and stratagems one should avoid in life. In some cases, the main character sells his tale in such convincing terms that readers feel as bamboozled and cheated as the literary victims of his con; "The Professor's Yarn" illustrates this theme. Other short accounts delight the reader with the sheer pretentiousness and incorrigibility of the main participants, as in "The Notorious Jumping Frog of Calaveras Country," one of the most widely reprinted stories Twain ever wrote.



"The Professor's Yarn" belongs to that marvelous ensemble of observations, vignettes, and tall tales collected in Twain's *Life on the Mississippi,* and involves a young land-surveyor (who later became a professor) on a steamship who encounters a loquacious rube from "interior Ohio," a location likely not known for its great cattle raisers, but Mr. John Backus assumed that role nonetheless. And he would not shut up; he stalked the teller of this story mercilessly, finally cornering him with the offer of a deal that involved engaging in some imaginative land-surveying to benefit his proposed cattle business in California in exchange for a share of the profits, which surely would be considerable. It was a shady deal that the future professor declined with righteous indignation, to the consternation of Mr. Cattle-raising expert, who

quickly backed down, only to engage a trio of scary card shark ruffians also on board, for the purpose of augmenting his California investment portfolio. The roughneck gamblers lured this Ohio pansy-sniffer into a marathon of card games, well lubricated by plentiful supplies of champagne, which worked its predictable effects on Mr. Backus's mental processes as well as on the surveyor's burgeoning sympathy. While land surveyor agonized over what seemed an inevitable disaster for that "foolish bulldriver," the stakes got higher and higher, until finally Backus made the final call: "What have you got?" he snapped. "Four kings, you d__d fool!" came the ruffian's answer, which triggered the Ohioan's last word on the bet: "'Four *aces*, you ass!' thundered Backus, covering his man with a cocked revolver. *'I am a professional gambler myself, and I've been laying for you duffers all this voyage!'"*[Italics in original][21] In fact, young surveyor reports that the object of his sympathy didn't know a cattle hoof from a house roof and had adopted that cover story only as a short term, dispensable ruse. He was a swindler, a con man. And a darned good one, to boot, faithfully reported by Twain's narrator, who could only react to this turn of events with a combination of fear and respect.

Neither reaction, however, is likely forthcoming for readers of "The Notorious Jumping Frog of Calaveras County," one of the most celebrated and widely reprinted stories in Twain's entire corpus. The tale centers on a certain disreputable Reverend Leonidas "Jim" W. Smiley, who gained his reputation less from his pulpit oratory and much more from his proclivity to bet on almost anything that chanced his way: "There couldn't be no solitry thing mentioned but what that feller'd offer to bet on it."[22] These included contests between horses, two-legged dogs, cats, chickens, a pair of birds sitting on a fence, and the recovery chances of another Parson's deathly ill wife, about whom he said: 'Well, I'll resk two-and-a-half that she don't [get better],

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[21] Twain, *Selected Works*, 244.
[22] Twain, *Collected Tales,* 172.

anyway.'[23] And, of course, he bet on frogs, one in particular named Dan'l Webster, who he prodded and trained and educated to the point where "you never see a frog so modest and straightfor'ard as he was, for all he was so gifted."[24] And he never lost; at least not until a challenger's owner "prized his mouth open and took a teaspoon and filled him full of quail-shot—filled him pretty near up to his chin—and set him on the floor."[25] Reverend Jim lost some money on that contest, but didn't discover he had been swindled until the other feller had skipped town and Jim "never ketched him." Did he learn anything from this experience? Not likely; Mark Twain left the premises during the telling of another story about Jim and his "yaller one-eyed cow that didn't have no tail only just a short stump like a bannanner, and…."[26] The explanation trails off into the nether regions of tall tale incredulousness. Moral of the story? At least this: Don't expect a braggart to change after being swindled. More importantly, appealing to the worst instincts of a flawed human being, or a very great many of them, yields temporary advantage, which is perhaps the most dangerous lesson that ever could be applied to political subjects. With or without humor, Mark Twain knew what he was talking about.

This especially is the case with regard to the fifth theme one finds in Twain's writings, and that has to do with his sense of life's uncertainty and unpredictability, of its frequently cruel tendencies and capabilities to lay waste the best plans and the highest aspirations human beings have placed for themselves. Dozens of his tales and many parts of his novels illustrate Twain's sense of the contingency of life, such as his essays on "Luck," and "Science vs. Luck," along with "Edward Mills and George Benton: A Tale," which recounts the lives of two men who from childhood to their deaths acted in ways that defied explanations about cause and effect, about

[23] Twain, *Collected Tales,* 173.
[24] Twain, *Collected Tales,* 174.
[25] Twain, *Collected Tales,* 175-76.
[26] Twain, *Collected Tales,* 177.

fate laughing in the face of virtue to reward those who pursued evil ways and prospered anyway, while leaving their morally upright brethren clawing for a scintilla of happiness. In short, exploring expectations versus outcomes, and life's adventitious quirks informed much of his writing, and nowhere are these themes better illustrated than in an "Extract from Captain Stormfield's Visit to Heaven" and the novella *The Prince and the Pauper.*

As the title indicates, Captain Stormfield's visit to heaven is a rather flippant treatment of a serious topic, which is what heaven is really like, since all members of the human race who are aware of it presume that eventually they shall all be there. In a burst of Twainiac absurdity, Stormfield stumbles upon humankind's eschatological destination quite by accident: He had been dead about thirty years and was getting a little anxious zipping around the universe at the speed of "about a million miles a minute—it might have been more, it couldn't have been less," racing comets here and there, including one that was carrying "eighteen hundred thousand billion quintillions of kazarks [whatever they are]" worth of brimstone for Satan, and measuring the distance between stars, which he discovered are much farther from each other than one would imagine from the earth.[27] Anyway, Stormfield learns that heaven is somewhat deficient in those august sublimities so often associated with it in Biblical terms; that is, it was not all that it was cracked up to be.

He learned this quite early upon discovery that among the gazillions of planets out there, earth really doesn't count for all that much; indeed, it took a heavenly clerk some time to fix the location of Stormfield's origins until finally he was admitted and outfitted for his eternal sojourn: "A harp and a hymn-book, pair of wings and a halo, size 13, for Cap'n Stormfield of San Francisco!—make out a clean bill of health, and let him in," were the exact words of his

[27] Twain, *Collected Tales,* 570.

initiation.[28] It didn't take Stormfield long to discover that no single size of heaven fit all, which meant that there were very many different kinds of heavens, each with its own elaborate hierarchy of administrative officials for all different kinds of folks. He acquired the best inside information from a veteran of heaven, who warned him that although no one was permitted to be unhappy, "singing hymns and waving palm branches through all eternity is pretty when you hear about it in the pulpit, but it's as poor a way to put in valuable time as a body could contrive." Further, Stormfield's heavenly adviser points out that 'eternal rest sounds comforting in the pulpit, too. Well, you try it once, and see how heavy time will hang on your hands. Why, Stormfield, a man like you, that had been active and stirring all his life, would go mad in six months in a heaven where he hadn't anything to do.'[29] This was also the case for those who had longed their entire earthly lives to cavort with patriarchs, in that the chances of actually catching a glimpse of, say Abraham or Elijah, were one in forty thousand years. Finally, Stormfield's crusty heavenly guide reminds him of 'what asses we used to be, on earth, about these things,' such as eternal youth, eternal bliss, or eternal *anything*. In short, Twain warns us against setting too high expectations about anything, including heaven. Especially heaven. Indeed, no stronger case for Twain's skepticism about the likelihood of dashed expectations could be made.

Training is everything. The peach was once a bitter almond; cauliflower is nothing but Cabbage with a College Education.

- The Tragedy of Pudd'nhead Wilson and the Comedy of the Extraordinary Twins

Twainquotes.com

In addition to Twain's cynicism about what he regarded as humanity's perversely embellished prospects about its future, he wrote much about how experience revealed the role

[28] Twain, *Collected Tales,* 575.
[29] Twain, *Collected Tales,* 578.

that accidents play in people's lives, and in the case of *The Prince and the Pauper*, the accident of birth. Twain's tale takes readers beyond the vagaries of one's parental heritage by adding two others: the serendipitous circumstance of the prince and the pauper being physically indistinguishable from each other, and, pressing even more the boundaries of unlikelihood, their actually meeting each other and exchanging social positions. Prince Edward and Tom Canty agreed to share each other's experiences for a short spell, after which they would resume the roles they were born with and their lives would proceed as they always had. Each would be enriched in the process and have his curiosity satisfied.

Naturally, the planned renewal of status did not occur on schedule and the prince and the pauper found it necessary to adjust to each other's lives. Transitions were difficult, excruciating in the case of Prince Edward, and all those surrounding the prince and the pauper reacted to their behavior in the same way by judging each one as mad. Thus, Edward found that his cavorting with Canty's brutish father and his companions inspired laughter and derision, while his counterpart did his awkward best to cope with a small battalion of attendants, sycophants, and royalty trained to respond to his every need. Each learned immensely from their respective experiences by adapting to and coping with one unforeseen and unforeseeable event after another, which in the case of the prince included beatings, kidnappings, and escapes in the rough and tumble world of his look-alike, while Tom Canty plodded through one awkward royal ceremony after another—risings in the morning, observing proper etiquette for meals, receiving visitors, proper attire, retiring in the evening and so forth—via a combination of good advice and plain subterfuge. And just when Canty thought he had it right, a chance encounter with his peasant mother during a royal procession triggered a most unprincely-like burst of recognition

that catapulted him back to square one of his training regimen: ‘My God, he has gone mad again!’ exclaimed his long-suffering Lord Protector.

It all ended up to their mutual benefit, of course. Another accidental encounter resulted in the prince and the pauper meeting together in the royal court, while those around them marveled at the physical resemblance and did their best to figure out which one was actual royalty, in spite of their respective claims and counterclaims. The final test only could have been passed by the real prince (now king, in light of Henry VIII’s death) and focused on the location and proper use of the royal seal. Tom Canty got the location right, but missed on the application of the emblem; he used this august symbol of royalty for cracking nuts, an admission that generated roars of laughter among all those present. At all events, Tom returned to his place in English society and lived a long happy life ever after, while the remainder of Edward VI’s brief reign was noted for his compassion and wisdom, both exercised in ways far beyond his tender years, until his premature death at the age of fifteen.

One can only speculate on how Edward would have carried out the duties of his office if he had lived longer, but Twain’s account of his earlier exploits serves to emphasize the surprises attendant even the most sheltered lives among us. Further, experience played its role as well, in that both main characters were deeply affected by the often harrowing episodes that put Edward on the edge of sudden death and Tom Canty just a minor mishap away from being exposed as a faker. Which recall two of Twain’s principles of conservatism for the “whole damned human race”: experience as the indispensable life-blood of every human being, which further teaches us that life’s uncertainties guarantee surprises and delights, as well as tragedies and triumphs—and most important of all, not to count on anything.

Why not? Ask the reproved and humiliated citizens of Hadleyburg about their noble pretenses to get further a flavor of what people are really like; ask the McWilliamses about the futility of relying on experts to alleviate uncertainties, to palliate our pretenses; and finally, snooker old Rev'rund Smiley with his celebrated jumping frog and ask him about his cow while you're at it—in short, do all these things, explore every niche of Mark Twain's merciless realism about life on planet earth and you'll get a full idea of what being a conservative really means. Because if anyone knows about experience, about human nature, expertise, swindlers, and the vagaries of life, it's Mark Twain, an American writer. Indeed, Mark Twain in his own words was not just An American; he was The American. And as we have recounted here, The Conservative American for all ages.