The Life of Mark Twain

- Born Samuel Langhorne Clemens in Florida, Missouri on November 30, 1835.
- Began working on a newspaper with his brother around the age of 15.
- Took the name “Mark Twain” from his days as a river pilot. It means “safe to navigate.”
- After the outbreak of the Civil War, Twain travelled all over the United States, working as a newspaper reporter in various places.
- Published *Connecticut Yankee* in 1889.
- Died on April 21, 1910.

Twain’s Politics

• “In religion and politics people's beliefs and convictions are in almost every case gotten at second-hand, and without examination, from authorities who have not themselves examined the questions at issue but have taken them at second-hand from other non-examiners, whose opinions about them were not worth a brass farthing.”

  - Autobiography of Mark Twain

• Mark Twain was very critical of people abusing their religious and political influence for personal gain.
Introduction

• Hank Morgan, a 19th century engineer with the capacity for making just about anything, is given the opportunity to forge a new history when he’s literally knocked back through the centuries by a disgruntled factory worker. Trapped in a time not his own, Hank struggles to accept his predicament and to bring logic and technology to the otherwise child-like minds of Camelot. In order to achieve his ends, he must take on the persona of “The Boss” and tread the superstitious lines drawn by the nobility and the church by carefully passing off his engineering feats as benign magic. Gradually, he puts an end to the foolish knighthood and his pockets of 19th century learning expand to all corners of the kingdom. Sadly, this futuristic utopia was not to be and, in an instant, an interdict from the Church sends his progress tumbling back into the Dark Ages. In the end, it is a none-too-pleased Merlin that puts the dear Boss to sleep for centuries to come...and right back where he started.
Notable Characters

- Hank Morgan (“The Boss”)
- Frame Narrator (Mark Twain)
- Clarence—the page to Hank
- Arthur—comes and goes in the story
- Merlin—Hank’s antagonist, depicted as a fraud
- Alisande (Sandy)—Hank’s love interest
- Hello-Central—daughter of Hank and Sandy
- Morgan Le Fay—a cruel, tyrannical ruler more than an enchantress

Characters we’ve seen before in other Arthurian works: Guinevere, Sir Sagramore Le Desirous, Sir Kay, Mordred, Lancelot, Gareth (Garry), Galahad, Pellinore, and others...
Some Themes

- **Monarchy** – Divine Right of King – linked to caste
- **Church** – Too powerful; political machine
- **Slavery/Serfdom** – wants to eliminate all together
- **Knighthood and knights armor** – against chivalry and armor (too uncomfortable/constrictive)

"She continued to fetch and pour until I was well soaked."
“[Clarence] arrived, looked me over with a smiling and impudent curiosity; said he had come for me, and informed me that he was a page.

‘Go’long,’ I said; ‘you ain’t more than a paragraph’” (13).
"I could have given my own sect the preference and made everybody a Presbyterian without any trouble; but that would have been to affront a law of human nature: spiritual wants and instincts are as various in the human family as are physical appetites, complexions, and features, and a man is only at his best, morally, when he is equipped with the religious garment whose color and shape and size most nicely accommodate themselves to the spiritual complexion, angularities, and stature of the individual who wears it; and besides I was afraid of a united Church" (78).
“The most of King Arthur’s British nation were slaves, pure and simple, and bore that name, and wore the iron collar on their necks; and the rest were slaves in fact, but without the name; they imagined themselves men and freemen, and called themselves so. The truth was, the nation as a body was in the world for one object, and one only: to grovel before king and Church and noble; to slave for them, sweat blood for them, starve that they might be fed...[etc.] And so poor-spirited were they that they took even this sort of attention as an honor” (63).
"...my paper travelled from group to group all up and down and about that huge hall, and my happy eye was upon it always, and I sat motionless, steeped in satisfaction, drunk with enjoyment. Yes, this was heaven; I was tasting it once, if I might never taste it more" (276).
The Yankee and Malory

• Twain includes excerpts from Malory’s *Le Morte D’Arthur*.
  – This establishes his unconventional retelling.
  – It pays tribute to older versions without overshadowing Twain’s version of Arthur.

• The characters' reactions to Malory:
  – Arthur's court finds it repetitious and dull
  – the Yankee switches between finding it charming and straightforward and calling it vague and unexciting
The Yankee and T.H. White

• Connections to *The Once and Future King*
  – Yankee eventually becomes Merlin
  – Sealed in a cave to sleep for thirteen centuries — just as Nimue in White is supposed to bewitch Merlin into the same fate.
  – Yankee “changes” Arthur into a peasant to teach him a lesson

• As the Yankee comes from the future to the past, there is a connection to the original sentiment of “the once and future king”
Questions/Commentary

• How else does this story connect to more recent works? (i.e. movies?)
• Can you make connections between this book and the time it was written in? (i.e. Civil War, Slavery, etc).
• Do you have any questions or comments about how this book connects with other things that we’ve read this semester?