

Unstable Temporalities

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In Mark Twain's satirical novel, Hank Morgan observes lying gallant knights and foul-mouthed ladies in the "genteel" upper class when he is transported from the nineteenth century in America into medieval Britain. Hank witnesses the cruel and unusual punishments of prisoners and the lower-class citizens, the majority of whom are innocent of the accused crimes during his time in the medieval ages. After observing the treatment of prisoners during his adventures, Hank deems medieval society as apathetic compared to his more "civilized" nineteenth century birthplace in American society. However, Hank fails to recognize the shortcomings of his own idealized birthplace as he constantly compares nineteenth century civilization, government, and technological advancements to the more transparently primitive medieval era while blaming generational indoctrination as the culprit. Twain uses Hank's blindness toward the eerie parallels of criminal justice to critique nineteenth century American society's intentional disregard of the similarities with the treatment of the prisoners in both time periods as being barbarous with the enforcement and acceptance of capital punishment for petty and even nonexistent crimes.

Twain uses his character Hank's accidental time travel into Britain's medieval era so that he could use satire to critique nineteenth-century American society's apathetic and cruel punishments on the impoverished in society who face capital punishment by the corrupt justice systems ruled by the upper classes. Twain recognizes that generational training and indoctrination of unethical laws are the roots to the core issues of societal imbalances of power with the class systems themselves, and that those class systems and their unethical principles result in the inane punishments and deaths of innocents while those in the upper class receive slaps on the wrists for crimes that lower classes are killed for. Twain combines the generational training, imbalances of power within class systems, and the torture and deaths of innocents to reveal that the justice system lacks the very thing it seeks to establish: justice. Even today, American society still inflicts harsher sentences and capital punishment for crimes that primarily target minorities. Unsurprisingly, many charged with capital punishment and executed have been proven innocent, too late, of course. Unless our current-day American society reviews, reflects, and revises laws that are harmful to minorities such as people of color, women, and the impoverished, then we will remain trapped in a time loop of cyclical violence.