

ANALYSIS

"Fenimore Cooper's Literary Offenses" (1895)

Mark Twain

This document is important primarily as an attack by late 19th-century Realism on early 19th-century Romanticism. Cooper rivaled Sir Walter Scott as the greatest Romance writer of the age and was called the American Scott. Twain blamed Scott--"the Sir Walter disease"--for the romantic feudalism of the South and for the Civil War.

Cooper and Twain had much in common, but their differences were polarizing to Twain: Both wrote historical novels, both were democrats, both were liberal on race, both idealized representatives of racial minority groups, both were pastoralists: Cooper was an agrarian pastoralist in the tradition of Crèvecoeur and Jefferson, whereas Twain was a folk pastoralist at odds with the folk. Cooper was born into landed wealth and was what Twain considered an aristocrat--an enemy of the common man and a fraud like the Duke and the King in *Huck Finn*--whereas the Huck in Twain turned into Tom Sawyer and he coveted, earned and married his way into the upper class. Cooper's pastoralism was informed, balanced and shaped by traditional Neoclassicism, as expressed in his prose style and aesthetics. Twain's pastoralism was balanced if not dominated by his moralistic rationalism, as evident in his wit, satire, burlesque, farce and allegory. His rationalism was rooted both in the 18th-century tradition of satire and in the Calvinism conditioned into him as a child.

Twain is always funny. As entertainment, his attack on Cooper is very successful and will delight most readers who dislike Cooper, those who have never read him, and those who never will because of Twain. He is entertaining even to those who appreciate Cooper. At the same time, his satire purports to be serious literary criticism that challenges other critics to defend Cooper if they can. He makes specific references to texts, details scenes and tries to persuade the public that his rival is not only incompetent but insane. In his satire he displays some of the same faults he attributes to Cooper: (1) he is a poor observer; (2) he falsifies facts; (3) he omits necessary details; (4) he is redundant; and he displays additional faults he does not attribute to Cooper: (5) substituting insult for argument; (6) meanspiritedness; (7) overwrought tone; (8) hectoring the reader; (9) dishonesty; and (10) hypocrisy.

He opens by accusing professors of praising Cooper without having read any of his books. Here his satirical tone is clear. We can infer that he is exaggerating, as when he declares that in one place in *The Deerslayer* Cooper "has scored 114 offences against literary art out of a possible 115." Yet in totality, he is able to list only 18 violations of "rules governing literary art in the domain of romantic fiction." From here on, while getting funnier, he increasingly loses credibility as a serious literary critic, because his exaggerations become falsifications of literary texts and purport to be factual.

Hawthorne differentiated between a romance and a novel in his Preface to *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851):

"When a writer calls his work a Romance, it need hardly be observed that he wishes to claim a certain latitude, both as to its fashion and material, which he would not have felt himself entitled to assume, had he professed to be writing a Novel. The latter form of composition is presumed to aim at a very minute fidelity, not merely to the possible, but to the probable and ordinary course of man's experience. The former--while, as a work of art, it must rigidly subject itself to laws, and while it sins unpardonably, so far as it may swerve aside from the truth of the human heart--has fairly a right to present that truth, under circumstances, to a great extent, of the writer's own choosing or creation.... He will be wise, no doubt, to make a very moderate use of the privileges here stated, and, especially, to mingle the Marvellous rather as a slight, delicate, and evanescent flavor, than as any portion of the actual substance of the dish offered to the Public."

As a Realist, Twain does not tolerate the genre of romance, or "the Marvellous," implicitly mocking not only Cooper, but Hawthorne, Melville and Poe. When he declares that he is listing the rules governing "romantic fiction," he is lying. He substitutes the rules governing Realist fiction for those of a different genre, in effect demanding that all fiction meet his criteria of Realism, eliminating not only romance, but science fiction--including his own *Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*--fantasy and even satire--his own best genre. Twain's 18 "rules violations" are merely insults, unsupported as yet by any evidence from the texts. The mockery is funny, but irrelevant to literary analysis: Cooper's fiction accomplishes nothing, all his characters are irrelevant corpses, they do not talk like Mark Twain, none of them have any meaning because they are not simplistic representations of Good and Evil, they are not predictable and therefore the narrative is nothing but "crass stupidities." His own Huck is neither simply Good nor predictable, thank God.

Nor does Twain admit that many readers all over the world enjoy Cooper. Apparently he has no idea why: "...the reader of the *Deerslayer* tale dislikes the good people in it, is indifferent to the others, and wishes they would all get drowned together." Funny but false: Readers all over the world admire the noble Uncas and Chingachgook and love Natty Bumppo. The more obvious his prejudices become, the more churlish and petty Twain becomes in this piece--his malice concealed by his humor. He ridicules two of Cooper's recurrent "tricks," walking in the moccasin tracks of an enemy to hide one's trail and people stepping on twigs. Why are these not recurrent examples of realism rather than "tricks"?

His first specific example of a "ridiculous" incident is a dud: a sea captain steers for a particular spot because "he knows of an undertow there which will hold her back against the gale and save [his ship]." As a former naval officer Cooper had as much nautical knowledge as any writer before Joseph Conrad, who praised him. Unsure whether he has misfired, Twain resorts to sarcasm and elbowing the reader: "isn't that neat?" Yes, Mark. That is the sort of convincing action readers enjoy.

His next example is his allegation that, in *The Last of the Mohicans* Natty follows "the track" of a cannon-ball. Funny but false: the cannonball comes crashing through the underbrush. It is very easy to observe its course through BROKEN TWIGS and branches and deduce the direction from which it came. That is not "tracking" a cannonball. Again he resorts to sarcasm and nudging the reader, who may have read the passage and know that it is entirely plausible: "Isn't that a daisy?" No, Mark. It's a cannonball crashing through foliage as dense as you are.

His next example also is dishonest: "Chicago was not stumped for long. He turned a running stream out of its course, and there, in the slush in its old bed, were that person's moccasin tracks..." It is not a "running stream," it is merely a "rivulet," not enough water to wash away recent tracks in the mud.

Next he cites several examples of scenes that he finds absurd, including one of the most admired in Cooper, young *Deerslayer* after he has killed his first man. He does not explain why such a scene is absurd, he merely assumes the reader will agree with him.

His next example is his funniest and most dishonest:

1. Twain describes the river in *The Deerslayer* differently than Cooper does.
2. He omits one of the main facts in the episode of the ark entering the river and the lake--the "small bit of lowland [that] extended so far forward as to diminish the breadth of the stream to half that width [to about 50 fifty feet]."
3. He gives the false impression that the entire width of the river is fifty feet, rather than only at a projection of lowland into the water that is quickly passed.
4. He falsely equates this unmentioned lowland with the entry to the lake.
5. He calls the river a "brook" to reduce its size.

6. He gives multiple measurements of the changing width of the stream that falsify Cooper's descriptions in a tone of amazement, as if streams never change widths.
7. He claims falsely that the width "has suddenly shrunk thirty feet" and that "this shrinkage is not accounted for."
8. He falsely states that the "narrowest part of the stream" is the "outlet from the lake," when in truth it is the point at which the "the water first entered what was properly termed the river."
9. He exaggerates the length of "a modern canal-boat" with an estimate over a century out of date.
10. Again over a century out of date, he exaggerates the width of the boat to about sixteen feet to make the scene ridiculous. Cooper says only that the boat was of "greater breadth than common" and that the stream is wide enough "to admit the passage of anything that did not exceed twenty feet in width."
11. He states falsely that the ark is scraping along with only "two feet of space to spare on either side" for the entire trip along the stream.
12. He states falsely that the ark is "being hauled against the stiff current," whereas Cooper says they are hauling *with* the current, and the confluence of the stream with the river is "causing the current to rush" forward; then he compares this rushing stream to other places where "rivers come rushing."
13. He states falsely that its rate of progress "cannot be more than a mile an hour"; that it "creeps along"; that it "will take the ark minute and a half to pass under" the bent tree.
14. He implies that the "sapling" bent over the river with six Indians on it is too small for them, whereas Cooper repeatedly uses the word "tree," then demonstrates that the tree is large enough.
15. He omits the fact that Deerslayer is urging Hurry Harry to "pull for your life!" and that "The scow redoubled its motion, and seemed to glide from under the tree as if conscious of the danger that was impending overhead."
16. He claims the six Indians stupidly leap for the passing ark one after another and fall into the river increasingly far astern, whereas in truth, they all run at once: "perceiving that they were discovered, the Indians...running forward on the tree, leaped desperately" toward the ark before it passed.
17. He claims falsely that the stupid chief is knocked "unconscious" dropping into the stern of the ark, whereas Cooper says "he was slightly stunned" and "unconscious of his situation."

He moves on to debunk a display of marksmanship in *The Pathfinder* that results in three successive bulls-eyes in a target from one hundred yards, each successive bullet entering the same hole. Is it unrealistic? Of course. By now miraculous shooting is a stock scene in adventure stories from *Robin Hood* to *Annie Oakley*. The display is indeed hard to believe. But that is the point. This is an example of "the Marvelous" that Hawthorne allows to the writer of a romance, as opposed to a novel.

After watching movies and TV, readers today are likely to wonder why Twain is making such a big deal out of it. There are amazing marksmen in the military and the Olympics and everybody has seen real and fictional snipers in law enforcement make incredible shots from a hundred yards or more. A person under 40 with average eyesight can see a small target at one hundred yards and easily fixate on the center of it. Hawkeye has exceptional eyesight, as his name indicates.

Until the Realist Movement of which Twain was a part, the prevailing view, especially of the Victorians, was that literature should represent ideals in elegant language, to elevate the reader. That is why *Huckleberry Finn* was so much criticized, even by Mrs. Clemens. Twain condemns Cooper for being a gentleman and making his dialogue appropriate to his readers in the Victorian Age. Most of all he faults

him for inconsistency, because Natty speaks low-class dialect at times and at other times a more elegant language. This is consistent with his being a synthesis of the frontiersman and the civilized Christian gentleman--both Bumpo (bumpkin) and Natty (fashionable). The word *natty* had been in currency since the late 18th century. Most educated people adjust their speech to their audience, speaking differently to different people, depending on education and social class or occupation.

"Realism" is a relative concept. Cooper and Twain are both realistic, but about different things. Huck says that Mr. Mark Twain "told the truth, mainly. There was things which he stretched, but mainly he told the truth." Cooper and Twain "stretch" different things. Huck shows up downriver at the Phelps farm just when they are expecting Tom Sawyer and just enough ahead of Tom's arrival that the Phelps can mistake Huck for Tom but not find out the truth before Tom arrives and Huck can let Tom in on his gambit. That stretch is truly "Marvelous."

Twain accuses Cooper of inconsistency in dialogue, but Cooper's understanding of human nature is consistent whereas Twain's flips from one book to another: Huck grows up goodhearted despite his evil Pap, whereas in *Puddn'head Wilson* a person's nature is determined entirely by environment and upbringing. Cooper also might point out that, unlike himself, Twain provokes bitter controversy because he is so ironic that most people misunderstand him--as he admits in *Puddn'head*--consequently his vision of society and race is unclear and provocative.

Twain concludes that "Cooper wrote about the poorest English that exists in our language." Poet Yvor Winters, the most severe of critics, is objective and hence a better observer: "I should like to insist that here, as in other scattered passages of Cooper, there is a prose possessing at once an authentic poetic perception and a rhetorical procedure both ingenious and controlled; that these scattered passages are frequently of sufficient length to be impressive; that among them there is considerable variety as regards the kind of prose employed; and that they display a stylist superior to any other in America--and I do not except Hawthorne--before Melville, one who in some respects foreshadows Melville, and one who can still be examined with pleasure and with profit."

Twain's last paragraphs are hysterical overkill, because he knows that somebody might check his representations against what Cooper actually wrote. There are plenty of opportunities in Cooper to laugh at improbabilities and absurdities--see the analysis of *The Prairie*--but Twain did not find them. Instead he resorted to a fraudulent performance that does to Cooper what those old scoundrels the Duke and the King do to Shakespeare. Even so, Twain's unfairness to Cooper is relatively inconsequential compared to the unfairness of similarly obtuse misreadings of *Huckleberry Finn*.

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