

Extra  
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John D. Cayman

Mark Twain as a Critic

One of Mark Twain's better known attempts at criticism is called, "Fenimore Cooper's Literary Offenses". The first time I read this article I was much amused. But, on more careful study, I realized that much of the criticism, while witty, was inaccurate.

Referring to Webster, I find that a critic is, "one skilled in judging the merits of literary or artistic work"; but I also find that a critic is, "one given to harsh or captious judgment". Too often, I fear, a critic surrenders to the urge to be witty forgetting that wit is cruel or critical while humor is kindly or sympathetic.

Perhaps the classic example of wit in theatrical criticism is Dorothy Parker's remark to a famous actress during the intermission on opening night when she said, "Don't look now but your show is slipping". We don't know today whether she spoke the truth but I am sure, having thought of the remark, she would have used it anyway.

In the same category of unkind and inaccurate criticism we find the opening paragraph of the article we are considering. Twain says, "In one place in Deerslayer and in the restricted space of two-thirds of a page Cooper has scored 114 offenses against literary art out of a possible 115". Based on the average of 480 words to each page in Cooper's books, this means an error every other word, an obvious impossibility. Further consideration of the article precludes the possibility that Twain was seeking emphasis through exaggeration.

Twain devotes several pages to generalizations, and since most of the points he brings up are questions of opinion, and further since he fails to give the references on which he bases his assertions, his ideas are hard to evaluate. One claim he makes can be answered. He states that in "Deerslayer" Cooper violates the literary requirement that "personages in a tale shall exhibit a sufficient excuse for being there". I was unable to find a single character in "Deerslayer" whose inclusion was not necessary to further the plot or to develop characterization. Perhaps he thought that the book should not have been written at all.

However, when he starts on Cooper as a woodsman, the going is easier <sup>for me</sup> ✓ Twain refers to five "tricks" of woodcraft used by Cooper as impossible and therefore amusing; but, if we can believe our early frontiersmen, Cooper is right and Twain wrong.

Daniel Boone complained of the difficulty in correctly estimating the number in a party of Indians because they trod in each others footprints; one of Cooper's tricks about which Twain complains.

Twain mentions the "hundred things" in the woods "handier to step on" than a dry twig. Perhaps there are, but anyone who has ever tried stalking a deer or even a grouse will side with Cooper.

Much to Twain's amusement, Cooper makes use of the undertow at one point in Lake Ontario to prevent a vessel from being blown on a lee shore during a gale. The shore

is quite accurately located in "Pathfinder" and modern charts indicate that this current actually exists today.

Again Cooper's hero uses a cannon ball that rolls out of the woods to locate a nearby fort. Twain admits that the cannon ball may have rolled to their feet but fails to realize that the path of this ball must point like an arrow to the fort and would be all that a trained woodsman would need to locate it.

Twain refers to, "the violation of the eternal laws of nature" when he (Cooper by proxy) turned a running stream out of its course, and there, in slush in its old bed, were moccasin tracks. If Twain doubted this, he could have tried it as I did. As the water became lower, ~~the muddy water on~~ the marks showed up very plainly.

The episode of the Attack on the Ark is used by Twain in order to prove that Cooper was not an observing writer. By misquoting Cooper and by a very unique bit of reasoning, he describes the outlet of Glimmerglass, which he obviously has never seen, as follows:

"In the 'Deerslayer' tale Cooper has a stream which is fifty feet wide where it flows out of a lake; it presently narrows to twenty as it meanders along for no given reason, and yet when a stream acts like that it ought to be required to explain itself. Fourteen pages later the width of the brook's outlet from the lake has suddenly shrunk thirty feet, and become 'the narrowest part of the stream.' This shrinkage is not accounted for. The stream has bends in it, a sure

indication that it has alluvial banks and cuts them; yet these bends are only thirty and fifty feet long. If Cooper had been a nice and punctilious observer he would have noticed that the bends were oftener nine hundred feet long than short of it."

Cooper describes the setting in simple terms. The outlet of the lake is 50 feet wide and the entrance to the river proper; i.e., the point at which the current became strong is 30 feet. The stream passes through wooded banks in bends 30 feet to 40 feet long gradually narrowing to slightly more than 20 feet in width.

I have visited this point many times, making a special trip there last summer with these two descriptions before me, and the stream today is exactly as described by Cooper. Mark Twain's life on the Mississippi must have colored his deductions about alluvial banks. Only a really careless observer would fail to realize that the outlet to this lake could not be through an alluvial plain or the bold flow would soon cut so deep a channel that the lake would disappear.

The details of the setting are important because of the Indian attack at this point. The ark, so called, on which the attack is made is a flat bottomed house boat about the size of a canal boat. This vessel is being drawn into the lake by two very strong men hauling on a rope attached to an anchor firmly fixed in the lake. Near the outlet to the lake a large tree extends out over the river. Six Indians are ready to run out on this tree and jump on the roof of the house boat. In the "Deerslayer" they fail to land on the roof, falling on the

rear deck or in the river. Obviously the time element is vital.

Let's estimate how much time the Indians had for their maneuver. A boat can easily be propelled in the manner described at five miles an hour. At this rate of speed the roof was under the tree exactly five seconds. That is a mighty short time for even a sure footed Indian to start from scratch and run ten feet along a slippery tree trunk before jumping to a roof some feet below. And the Indians expected the boat to be rowed slowly past.

A truly remarkable series of misconceptions trapped Twain at this point. First, he assumed that the rate of speed of the boat cannot be more than "one mile an hour." His assumption is wrong as anyone can prove by an easy test. Next he guesses that the ark is 140 feet long. This guess must have been influenced by his European tour as some canal boats on the Continent were more than twice as long as our modest 50 foot to 60 foot boats. By these two guesses Twain greatly simplified the Indians' problems. In the full minute he so kindly provided the passage along the trunk could have been made on their hands and knees.

If Twain wished to ridicule claims as to marksmanship he might better have read Dickens more carefully. In American Notes we find a reference to "Indian hands which could split a bead or a feather with a rifle ball". But instead he refers to "Cooper's high talent for inaccurate observation." In the account of the shooting match in "The Pathfinder" Cooper is indited on four counts:

First, that no one could see the head of a common wrought nail at 100 yds.

Second, that no one could hit it with a rifle ball.

Third, that after two shots were fired at a large target and only one hole appeared, it was safe to assume that both bullets had entered the same hole.

Fourth, that it would be a miracle to have three bullets enter the same hole.

It would appear either that Twain was unfamiliar with the nails of 1840 with their roughly formed heads almost a half an inch in diameter, or he was too lazy to pace off 100 yards and make the test. I can assure you that it is easy enough to see this size nail at this distance.

Actual records show that Deerslayer's shooting was not particularly remarkable. I shall quote from Great Shooting Stories by Stuart D. Ludlum. An account of the last five shots fired in setting the world's record for offhand shooting at 200 yards is officially given as follows:

"Pope loaded and fired his ninety-sixth shot. It was a nipper twelve. The scorer inserted a plug in the hole. The ninety-seventh drove the plug out. The ninety-eighth was a quarter inch below, scored eleven. The ninety-ninth again drove out the plug and the hundredth came one quarter inch from the last, scored ten. The two strings were totaled: 917. A new record had been made. And it still stands unequalled!"

This record is more remarkable in that it was made in deep snow with the flags frozen so that it was impossible to guage the wind. As Ludlum states, "Groups made by Pope, the

late C. W. Rowland, dean of the old-time rest shooters, Donaldson, Roberts, and others, that show ten shots at one hundred yards and even two hundred yards going into one ragged hole, have often been published. Pope himself has one 200-yard target that shows ten shots grouping within five-eighths of an inch, center to center! Though temperamental, the Pope muzzle-breech-loading Schuetzen rifle, under proper conditions and in the hands of a rifleman willing to study and master the methods that must be used to get results, will yet outshoot up to two hundred yards any other type of rifle in existence."

These men were all shooting handmade guns exactly similar to the rifle used by Deerslayer.

One of Twain's statements to which I personally take violent exception is "that the man who talks corrupt English six days a week must and will talk it on the seventh." I should hate to think that I could never vary the profane and incorrect English I use to make myself understood in the shop. Naturally I approve when Deerslayer in talking to an educated friend, describes his sweetheart as follows:

"'She's in the forest--(hanging from the boughs of the trees,) in a soft rain--in the dew on the open grass--the clouds that float about in the blue heavens--the birds that sing in the woods--the sweet springs where I slake my thirst--and in all the other glorious gifts that come from God's Providence!" Even though a few hours before he addressed a frontiersman in these words, "'It consarns me as all things that touches a fri'nd consarns a fri'nd.'".

In spite of Twain's statement that a soldier sounds like a windy melodramatic actor for saying "Stand firm and be ready my gallant 60ths" Cooper certainly caught the spirit of the young republic better than Twain. Every school boy is familiar with the quotations: "Don't fire until you see the whites of their eyes"; "We have met the enemy and they are ours"; and "I regret I have but one life to give for my country". And the men using these expressions are among America's greatest heroes.

Twain states that, "Cooper's word sense is singularly dull" and gives as examples 31 words "gathered from half a dozen pages of the tale called Deerslayer". Twain seems to have ignored two factors: first the changes in meaning of words between 1841 and 1893 and second the idea Cooper wished to convey.

As usual it is hard to locate Twain's references, possibly because I did not have a First Edition of Deerslayer. Perhaps the words were changed in later editions. In any event 15 words were not located. The meaning of most of these words showed little change in the 52 years under consideration. In each instance it would appear to be a question of preference, or a question of the meaning to be conveyed as to which is the better word:

Cooper used: verbal

Twain suggests: oral

dependent on

resulting from

fact

condition

fact

conjecture

explain

determine

mortified

disappointed

embedded

inclosed

stood

stooped

rejoined

remarked

insensible

unsentient

brevity

celerity

counteracting

opposing

Twain is right in objecting to the use of the expression "funeral obsequies". The addition of the word funeral was redundant in 1841 as it is today.

The following are the quotations located where the meaning of the words has shown little change:

facility (which)  
"The precision with/those accustomed to watchfulness, marvels  
xxx, sleep is not the least of the phenomena of our mysterious being."

predetermined  
"xx and yet, at a necessary hour the mind appears to arouse the bodyxxxx."

primitive  
"xx the coolness of the night and woods, in connection with an exceedingly unsophisticated bed, had a little chilled her."

expectancy  
"Their arms were near them, xxx, in careless preparation."

subdued  
rebuked and quiet manner, xx."  
"The former (squaws) laughed and chatted in their

caution  
"xxx, he had been watched in a way to render the precaution useless."

replaced  
"xxx, the hues appearing gray and softened with the outlines of objects diffused xxx."

hostile  
"xxx, in order to defeat a treacherous design of his enemies."

condition  
"xxx, the girl arose and was seen gazing about her, like one assuring herself of her situation."

"xxx, more than any apprehension of a <sup>differing</sup> different nature."

"But these signs were <sup>suspicious</sup> distrusted or misunderstood."

"Come here, where no eyes." <sup>sight</sup> (Indian speaking).

"The beautiful and soothing calm of eventide has been extolled by a thousand poets, and yet it does not bring with it the far-reaching and sublime thoughts of the half-hour that precedes the rising of a summer's sun. In the one case the panorama is gradually hid from the sight, while in the other its objects start out from the unfolding picture, first dim and misty, then marked in, in solemn background; next seen in the witchery of an <sup>disappearing</sup> increasing, a thing as different as possible from the <sup>deepening</sup> decreasing twilight, and finally mellow, distinct, and luminous, as the rays of the great center of light diffuse themselves in the atmosphere."

"xxx, moral truths, that are presented in their simplicity without the <sup>factitious</sup> meretricious aids of ornament or glitter." It is interesting to note Johnson's Dictionary of the English Language published in 1805 defines meretricious as "alluring by false show" which is exactly the definition given today. However, Richardson's Dictionary of 1875 gives a far less definite meaning for this word. It is possible that this led Twain to commend the change.

In the last case to be considered, Cooper is ~~unquestionably~~ right. In 1805 the term "imbecility" meant feebleness of mind or body and this same definition is to be found 1875. It was since that time that the limitation of the meaning of this word to "mental deficiency" has been adopted. For this reason

Cooper was unquestionably correct in using the term "mental imbecility", even though it sounds redundant to us today.

William Lyons Phelps recently wrote: "Cooper's chief faults are faults of style; his English is chronically bad. His powers of characterization did not include subtlety. But he was a master of action; and his books have in them the principle of life."

So we see that Twain would have had plenty of material for his criticism of Cooper without attacking him as a story teller, where Cooper is admittedly a master.

In my criticism of Literary Criticism, I found myself faced with the problem I mentioned at the start and I found some of my best wit would not stand the test of honesty and had to be omitted. However, I hope I have justified my position: if the object of Literary Criticism is to guide the prospective reader, then wit must be subordinated to truth.