

Two Major Voices of the 19th Century American Fiction: An Evaluation

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Abstract:

The paper aims to find the genesis of the two early exponents in American fiction who digressed and dismissed its rather mawkish concerns and ordinary obsessions. The two novelists Nathaniel Hawthorne and Cooper widened the scope of American fiction by their exalted sensibilities and unmatched fictional prowess. The paper also tries to explore the vivid turns and twists in a structure of novel that had not gone beyond neurotic obsessions with physical adventures. The fillip they lent and the dimensions they added to American fiction took the very tradition of novel writing to a new level of art.

Key words: Adventure, substance, meaning, social realism

1. INTRODUCTION

The development of the American novel has not been swift and natural as that of the English novel. Literature in general struggled in America for a cluster of reasons. The migration of T.S. Eliot is a major event because had T.S. Eliot stayed on in America the story might have been different. The awareness

and the conditions required for allowing literature to flourish were non-existent. America was a troubled nation, oblivious of its true history, of its cultural moorings and its traditional heritage. In such a situation when the nation itself was not organized, it would be too much to expect organized literature. T.S. Eliot was sensitive enough to realize it and lost no time in migrating to England, where he labored to be 'an insidious infiltrator' rather than an uprooted American, blending the Yanki and John Bull with focus on the sophistication of London.

In contrast to the pace of the development of English novel the Americans were rather confused, unsure and hardly able to conceive of a form of novel until the appearance of *Hawthorne's Scarlet Letter* which set the wheel of American novel in motion. The tradition of a literary form not much savoured and vaunted was off to a sedate start and took time reconciling itself to the brilliance of efforts displayed by more organized and systematic efforts of the later writers. Though fiction in English in England also had to wait till eighteenth century to make its mark and the subsequent headways it achieved would not have been possible without the efforts of Daniel Defoe, Samuel Richardson and Henry fielding.

2. MAIN BODY

England was a bit fortunate to have seen the emergence of writers committed to elevating literary tradition or graduating out of its own delicacies in the eighteenth century. The factors responsible for the fairy tale growth of English novel are widely known and among the many reasons the most important being the emergence of the middle class sensibility which accepted novel as a medium most relevant to the projections of their problems and the real issues. No such event took place in America and the romantic escapism went on to become the ruling impulse of a nation most unwilling to understand and interpret the realities of a struggling society.

Charles Dickens in writing his novels writes his times. A chance child thrown at the mercy of the church wardens did not spare the Victorian civilization from his wrath as much of his writing ridiculed the phantom masters of the Victorian Empire with absolute disdain. This indeed is an evidence of the writers understanding of his world, of the society around or of the trends available on the social and political planes. This is perhaps the very tragedy of American novel to make its literary history. The American writers were neither adequately educated nor did they have the social moorings or any sense of contemporaneity which they could have employed in fiction. Melville whose story of the spirit of sacrifice and the saga of destruction, the conception of the chaos and the cosmos heralded the advent of a tradition in fiction that never allowed the American novel to drift in any other direction. The literary heritage of Howells and James was absolutely European along with the French impact of the realists and naturalists. To find evidence of the American novelist leaning towards the European mythology illustrated by most of the nineteenth century writers and the admission of the English novelists *Scots and Marryat* were thoroughly exposed. There was hardly anything indigenously American in Hawthorne who made no secret about his patterns of thought having roots in the Elizabethan tradition. Even Melville who exposed himself to a wide ranging influences drawn from European classics *Rabelai, Cervantes Shakespeare, King James Bible, Goethe and Carlyle* speak volumes about the lack of originality and the thickness of the original experience of the native land. It was the 19th century Americans allowing its fiction to dramatise the alien world finding no roots in the native culture. What ailed the American novel for most part of the 19th century is the original text or reference to the land of lost opportunities. Even *Stephen Crane* relied on a heavy dose of European naturalistic doctrine interspersed with certain subjective associations reminding of *Joseph Conrad, Thomas Hardy and Ford Madax Ford*. The

European basis of their novel in fact purged it of the mire and fury of life pushing it deep towards the tragic mode of feeling and perceiving. Hawthorne's much hyped settlement and the imaginative forest, *Melville's* known shore and unexplored sea, *Twain's fabulous* use of East and the unknown west, *Howell's* oscillation between simplicity of a traditional form and the sophisticated glance of a rootless modern city typifies America as a whole. It is *Howell* that one finds a struggle within the artist to identify himself with roots in a state of advancing to imitate the high flying unapproachable worlds of fantasies and idiosyncrasies. This is perhaps the point where America suffers as a nation and its art plunges into a borrowed world of artificially created images of splendor, mirth and the giggling of the voices suppressed beneath the desire to burn realities under the guise of imported dreams.

3. DISCUSSIONS

Of the 19th century American writers *James Fennimore Cooper* extends the tradition of fictional writing into the unexplored vagaries of the moral and the aesthetic world. *Cooper* indeed was the first American novelist to treat fiction seriously as a medium of art and to see it as a serious and meaningful vehicle of expression. His unsparing efforts to find a moral and aesthetic basis of his novel culminated into producing a highly complex and creative work of art, adding a new chapter to the intellectual and imaginative history of American people and its nation. With *Cooper* American Literature comes into its own. The fillip it received and the dimensions he lent, opened up new horizons for an otherwise slow fictional progress. By 1829 half a dozen of his novels were published, republished in England and were translated into French and German. *Cooper's* own declaration in a letter of 1831 is a revelation of his objective as a writer.

He writes:

“My country’s mental independence is my object and if I can go down to the grave with the reflection that I have done a little toward it, I shall have the consolation of knowing that I have not been useless in my generation.”

It is quite obvious from the statement that *Cooper* had set himself a task, a task to reorient the American mind, to stimulate the impulse of creativity assimilating the major contemporary thought currents and to breathe new life into new found culture of America. *Cooper* indeed was a product of frantic conditions which became the material of his novel. In *High Times* he cried in 1857, not only for the respectability, but for the safety of the American people, that they should promulgate a set of principles that are more in harmony with their facts. This was the rationale of his writings. His subjects were too simple, illustrative of his pronounced stands. The American society, the American history, and American backwoods and the sea constituted the backdrop of his novels. *The spy, the pioneers and the pilot* conform to his stated ideals, themes and principles. In the novel written between 1820 to 30 which is about ten in all where he does not seem to be a serious articulate artist emerging out of the shadows to guide the American society to its final culmination. He is simply a teller of tales with occasional blinks and the state of affairs. He is more a detached observer than a participant into the scheme of things. In ‘*precaution*’ he does not ascribe his art to any dogma but relies on moralizing and this morality stays with him till the very end. It is not that *Cooper* was oblivious of the contemporary English world as there are evidence of impact of the historical romances of *Scott* and the extremely civil manners of *Jane Austen*. Even *Balzac, Dana* and *Smollet* had their influences on him. But it was not a blind following of the available trends. His imagination was his own, his presentation was too subjective but the ideas which he might have borrowed only suggest the possible connections of the world around him.

The American history constituted the basis for his '*The Slay*', which in a way announced the beginning of the mature American novel. By no stretch of imagination it can be said that with *Cooper* the firm foundation of American fiction was laid and the fictional art flourished into a new literary revolution. *Cooper* was an American in letter and spirit and in writing his novel, he writes the evolution of American culture through a period of stumbling self-discovery.

Mark Twain writes:

Cooper's gift in the way of invention was not a rich endowment; but such as it was he liked to work it, he was pleased with the effects, and indeed he did some quite sweet things with it. In his little box of stage-properties he kept six or eight cunning devices, tricks, artifices for his savages and woodsmen to deceive and circumvent each other with, and he was never so happy as when he was working these innocent things and seeing them go. A favorite one was to make a moccasined person tread in the tracks of a moccasined enemy, and thus hide his own trail. Cooper wore out barrels and barrels of moccasins in working that trick. Another stage-property that he pulled out of his box pretty frequently was the broken twig. He prized his broken twig above all the rest of his effects, and worked it the hardest. It is a restful chapter in any book of his when somebody doesn't step on a dry twig and alarm all the reds and whites for two hundred yards around. Every time a Cooper person is in peril, and absolute silence is worth four dollars a minute, he is sure to step on a dry twig. There may be a hundred other handier things to step on, but that wouldn't satisfy Cooper. Cooper requires him to turn out and find a dry twig; and if he can't do it, go and borrow one. In fact, the Leatherstocking Series ought to have been called the Broken Twig Series.

Fenimore Cooper's Literary Offenses, Mark Twain

Professor Matthews remarks:

The five tales reveal an extraordinary fullness of invention. ...
One of the very greatest characters in fiction, Natty Bumppo...
The craft of the woodsman, the tricks of the trapper, all the

delicate art of the forest were familiar to Cooper from his youth up.

Willkie Collins observes

Cooper is the greatest artist in the domain of romantic fiction in America.

George E. Woodberry remarks

"The *Scarlet Letter*" is a great and unique romance, standing apart by itself in fiction; there is nothing else quite like it. Of all Hawthorne's works it is most identified with his genius in popular regard, and it has the peculiar power that is apt to invest the first work of an author in which his originality finds complete artistic expression. It is seldom that one can observe so plainly the different elements that are primary in a writer's endowment coalesce in the fully developed work of genius; yet in this romance there is nothing either in method or perception which is not to be found in the earlier tales; what distinguishes it is the union of art and intuition as they had grown up in Hawthorne's practice and had developed a power to penetrate more deeply into life.

Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804–1864). *The Scarlet Letter & Rappaccini's Daughter*. The Harvard Classics Shelf of Fiction. 1917.

Nathaniel Hawthorne is an extension of the American fictional tradition beyond the purview of the realistic novel with social purpose pioneered by *Cooper*. If there is any novelist in 19th century America who toiled less and profited more it is only *Hawthorne*, quick to discover his special gift, the flair for creative art with the best of articulation. Hawthorne launched himself with all the exuberance and flamboyance which he found difficult to sustain once '*Scarlet Letter*' came out. There are a few writers in the history of the world whose fortune has rested on a single work of importance, Hawthorne is one such fellow frantically known as the writer of the '*Scarlet Letter*' the world over.

Hawthorne does not seem to bother much about the assiduously built world of *Cooper* nor does he seem to share the burden of an upcoming American culture. His cogent perceptions were firmly related to the problems of the land and to the history of a nation alive to its existence. It was out of *Hawthorne's* ironic vision and his sense of paradox which permeated most of his finest works. *Hawthorne*, like *Cooper*, does indulge in the explication of the land which finds no exaggerated concern for the emancipation of the American society. His utterances and milieu mark a serious digression from the patterns of thought *Cooper* clung to. *Hawthorne* is more serious an artist with more creative energy to underlie what apparently he felt to be the real paradox of an advancing civilization. His paradoxes and the deliberate attempt to investigate the confusing psyche of a battered society constitute the backdrop his novels. The combination of skepticism and faith determine his choice of the themes of initiation and guilt. *Hawthorne* has treated his subject with meticulous care and precision stamping the authority and flair of a writer reminding us of *Faulkner* and *Robert Penn Warren*. *Hawthorne* indeed through his sustained projection of the deeper psychology in line with Henry James becomes the most modern of the nineteenth century American writers. Alienation or insulation which is a contrast to the osmosis of being that *warren* has suggested and written about comes close to Hawthorne's perception of damnations the many American novelists suffered. There is in effect a synthesis between the personal and the social commitment, *Hawthorne* is delightfully personal in so far as he confines his, ruling passion to a drab world where human psychology is all the more relevant to the determination of alienation and the guilt which become too rational and subjective. *Hawthorne* the artist often did his best writing when he wrote not of what he believed or wanted to believe or thought he should believe, but of the phantoms that came unsought and haunted him. *The Haunted Man* is a case in point.

The young woman was tall, with a figure of perfect elegance on a large scale. She had dark and abundant hair, so glossy that it threw off the sunshine with a gleam; and a face which, besides being beautiful from regularity of feature and richness of complexion, had the impressiveness belonging to a marked brow and deep black eyes. She was ladylike, too, after the manner of the feminine gentility of those days; characterised by a certain state and dignity, rather than by the delicate, evanescent, and indescribable grace which is now recognised as its indication. And never had Hester Prynne appeared more ladylike, in the antique interpretation of the term, than as she issued from the prison. Those who had before known her, and had expected to behold her dimmed and obscured by a disastrous cloud, were astonished, and even startled, to perceive how her beauty shone out, and made a halo of the misfortune and ignominy in which she was enveloped. It may be true that, to a sensitive observer, there was something exquisitely painful in it. Her attire, which indeed, she had wrought for the occasion in prison, and had modelled much after her own fancy, seemed to express the attitude of her spirit, the desperate recklessness of her mood, by its wild and picturesque peculiarity. But the point which drew all eyes, and, as it were, transfigured the wearer--so that both men and women who had been familiarly acquainted with Hester Prynne were now impressed as if they beheld her for the first time--was that SCARLET LETTER, so fantastically embroidered and illuminated upon her bosom. It had the effect of a spell, taking her out of the ordinary relations with humanity, and enclosing her in a sphere by herself.

The 'Scarlet Letter' lifted Hawthorne to the singing hall of immortality and established him as the leading 19th century fictional voice of America. This novel achieves a perfect equilibrium between the intended and achieved meanings. The novel is all of a piece with magnificent unity of meaning that emerges equally from what it says and what it shows, this is something which *'the House of seven Gables'* fails to achieve. *Earth's Holocaust* and *Sunday at Home* oscillate between light

and dark, negation and affirmation. What *Hawthorne* achieved finally as an artist is to exhibit the firm commitment of a novelist who does not shy away from the milieu of his stated ideal, the portable ivory tower moving about in a period of literary realism pregnant with moral and allegorical overtones. *Hawthorne* is by no means a moralist or a fable living author but simply an author on a mission to strike a balance between what is said and done and this is how there is no idealistic strain in his novels, he is a serious exponent of a line of thought giving bare representation to what he professed and practiced when it came to art.

Henry James observes

“His bitterness,” says M. Montégut, “is without abatement, and his bad opinion of man is without compensation....”

American novel with Hawthorne was introduced to some aspects of fictional writing which stayed with the very art of novel for all times to come, and this standpoint in the 19th century American novel becomes watershed in its history.

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