

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PRAIRIE IN 19TH-CENTURY AMERICAN LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT

From a literary point of view, the vast American prairie has always had significance only insofar as it has affected the imagination of creative writers; the reality of the American prairie has consistently been subservient to idealistic concepts usable by creative artists to further thematic goals. Of the many literary themes associated with the American prairie in 19th-century American literature, four are dominant: (1) the sense of isolation, loneliness, engulfment; (2) the sense of unlimited potential (in character, action, and human understanding); (3) the sense of wonder and awe; and (4) the sense of a divine presence guiding the individual and the social group. These four dominant themes may be clearly discerned in a great variety of literary texts, and they are especially evident in four important works: (1) Cooper's The Prairie (1827); (2) Bryant's "The Prairies" (1833); (3) Irving's A Tour on the Prairies (1835); and (4) Whitman's Leaves of Grass (1855).

It is the purpose of this paper to explore, albeit in a limited and selective manner, the literary significance of the vast American prairie for the nineteenth century. Whatever the prairies signified to most Americans--and the myriad economic, political, geographical, and sociological facets cannot be analyzed here--for the literary mind, the American prairie had significance only insofar as it affected the imaginings of creative writers. Despite the overwhelming reality of the prairie, it was--as might be expected--the mythological prairie, not the real one, that survived in important literary texts of nineteenth-century America.

For this discussion, I have sought to demonstrate, by selecting quotations from four literary texts, the overriding importance of four nineteenth-century thematic conventions relating to the American prairies. All four texts, composed by creative artists who were essentially ignorant of the American prairies, reveal a mythological, conventionalized version of the western grasslands. I have chosen to look briefly at James Fenimore Cooper's romance The Prairie (1827), William Cullen Bryant's poem "The Prairies" (1833), Washington Irving's travel narrative A Tour on the Prairies (1835), and Walt Whitman's Leaves of Grass (1855-1892).

What did the American prairie signify for these four literary artists? Four themes, I will argue, are easily discernible in their views of the prairie: (1) the sense of isolation and loneliness; (2) the sense of unlimited potential (in character, action, and human understanding); (3) the sense of wonder and awe; and (4) the sense of a divine presence. A brief consideration of the texts will underscore these thematic conventions.

James Fenimore Cooper's romance, The Prairie (1827), did not draw upon his personal observations of the western grasslands. As Henry Nash Smith observed, "Cooper had never been within a thousand miles of the region in western Nebraska or Wyoming which he chose as the setting for The Prairie" (Cooper vii). Instead he relied heavily on secondary sources for information on the landscape and on the customs of the Plains

Indians. The Lewis and Clark Journals which had been published in 1814; the account of Major Stephen H. Long's expedition up the Platte River to the Rocky Mountains, published in 1823; as well as other sources, furnished Cooper all he needed for his literary purposes. Indeed, anyone familiar with Mark Twain's essay, "Fenimore Cooper's Literary Offenses," will not labor under the illusion that Cooper's intent was the straightforward reporting of observed phenomena. As a romantic storyteller, Cooper sought, as he remarked in his "Preface to The Leatherstocking Tales," "a poetical view of the subject."

The Prairie is the only one of Cooper's Leatherstocking Tales to be set west of the Mississippi River. Natty Bumppo is an aged man, now forced to make his living as a trapper. But his fierce independence and integrity survive. The Plains Indians are poetically presented. And--for students of the prairies--the accounts of the buffalo stampede and of the prairie fire are justly celebrated.

The loneliness and isolation felt by Natty Bumppo on the great prairie may be illustrated by the following brief quotation. Natty speaks to a group of settlers:

"You may travel weeks and you will see it [the prairie] the same. I often think the Lord has placed this barren belt of prairie behind the States, to warn men to what their folly may yet bring the land! Ay, weeks if not months, may you journey in these open fields, in which there is neither dwelling nor habitation for man or beast. Even the savage animals travel miles on miles to seek their dens" (19).

The trapper is a great appreciator of the beauties of nature. In the climactic debate between Natty Bumppo and Dr. Obed Bat (the heretical evolutionist), Natty's sense of wonder and awe emerges strikingly:

"Look about you, man; where are the multitudes that once peopled these prairies, the kings and the palaces, the riches and the mightinesses of this desert? . . . They are gone. Time has lasted too long for them. For why? Time was made by the Lord, and they were made by man. This very spot of reeds and grass, on which you now sit, may once have been the garden of some mighty king" (278-79).

Natty is, of course, arguing for an intuitive appreciation of nature, against Dr. Bat's more scientific and rational attempts to study nature.

The unlimited potential of human nature, associated with the prairies imaginatively treated, pervades The Prairie. Captain Middleton's description of Natty Bumppo illustrates Cooper's tendency to personify the prairies into supreme character traits:

"The man I speak of was of great simplicity of mind, but of sterling worth. Unlike most of those who live a border life, he united the better instead of the worst qualities of the two people. He was a man endowed with the choicest and perhaps rarest gift of nature; that of distinguishing good from evil. His virtues were those of simplicity, because such were the fruits of his habits, as were indeed his very prejudices. In courage he was the equal of his red associates; in warlike skill, being better instructed, their superior" (128).

Natty is thus the idealized product of the prairies. One notes, of course, what have come to be recognized as general American character traits.

The presence of the deity is often invoked in The Prairie, usually in association with either the appreciation of the gaunt beauty of the landscape or with the barren waste. Cooper's description of the arrival of autumn to the prairies is typical:

The season was on the point of changing its character; the verdure of summer giving place more rapidly to the brown and party-colored livery of the fall. The heavens were clothed in driving clouds, piled in vast masses one above the other, which whirled violently in the gusts; opening, occasionally, to admit transient glimpses of the bright and glorious sight of the heavens, dwelling in a magnificence by far too grand and durable to be disturbed by the fitful efforts of the lower world. Beneath, the wind swept across the wild and naked prairies with a violence that is seldom witnessed in any section of the continent less open. It would have been easy to have imagined, in the ages of fable, that the god of the winds had permitted his subordinate agents to escape from their den, and that they now rioted in wantonness across wastes where neither tree, nor work of man, nor mountain, nor obstacle of any sort, opposed itself to their gambols (92).

A divine presence has, in typical Romantic fashion, been extrapolated by the contemplation of landscape.

William Cullen Bryant's stately poem, "The Prairies" (1833) was occasioned by his visit to his brothers in Illinois in 1832. Although it is an eloquent description of the prairie lands, it is likely that Bryant was responding more to European sneers about the American prairies than he was to the actual prairies themselves. (Note Bryant's description of the prairies as "the gardens of the desert . . . For which the speech of England has no name.") In truth, the poem is not unlike other of Bryant's poems which deal with the grandeur of northern forests and mountains (Brown 217-18).

As is usual in Bryant's nature poems, the sense of the presence of the dead predominates. It is unfortunate that Bryant subscribed to the nineteenth-century "Mound Builders" theory; such a theory proved to be an insult to the Plains Indians. Yet, the presence of the mounds in the vast, rolling prairies does serve to underscore the sense of loneliness and isolation one feels when contemplating such a scene:

As o'er the verdant waste I guide my steed,
Among the high rank grass that sweeps his
sides . . . I think of those
Upon whose rest he tramples (484).

But the ancient scenes are only imagined memories. The present scene is devoid of strife and vigor:

The beaver builds
No longer by these streams, but far away,
On waters whose blue surface ne'er gave back
The white man's face . . .

In these plains
The bison feeds no more. Twice twenty leagues
Beyond remotest smoke of hunter's camp,
Roams the majestic brute, in herds that shake
The earth with thundering steps--yet here I meet
His ancient footprints stamped beside the pool
(485).

Yet isolation and loneliness are offset in the poem by a sense of a divine presence:

Man hath no part in all this glorious work:
The hand that built the firmament hath heaved
And smoothed these verdant swells, and sown their
slopes
With herbage, planted them with island-groves,
And hedged them round with forests (484).

A sense of power, of unlimited potential, too, occurs to the poet:

Thus change the forms of being. Thus arise
Races of living things, glorious in strength,
And perish, as the quickening breath of God
Fills them, or is withdrawn (485).

But the lingering sense of wonder and awe remain with the poet as he imaginatively contemplates the majestic prairies:

From the ground
Comes up the laugh of children, the soft voice
Of maidens, and the sweet and solemn hymn
Of Sabbath worshippers. The low of herds
Blends with the rustling of the heavy grain
Over the dark brown furrows. All at once
A fresher wind sweeps by, and breaks my dream,
And I am in the wilderness alone (486).

The noble expression and stately blank verse serve to dignify the concluding scene of man's insignificance amid the vast prairies.

In October and November of 1832, Washington Irving--at that time America's most famous literary artist--made a tour, on horseback, of the Indian territories of the Midwestern frontier. In company with Henry L. Ellsworth, a government Indian commissioner, and other assorted travelers, including a company of mounted rangers, Irving traversed the area west of the Arkansas River, starting from Fort Gibson (in present-day Oklahoma) to the Cross Timbers. Historians of the American prairies can find much of value in Irving's 1835 travel book, A Tour on the Prairies, which relates events of this hazardous trip; for, in his typically picturesque and whimsical style, Irving provides accounts of buffalo-hunting, descriptions of the animal and plant life of the prairies, and his impressions of climatic conditions. Nevertheless, A Tour on the Prairies is a literary work, not a journalistically accurate travel book. When Irving's account is compared to Ellsworth's manuscript version of the same journey, the reader is struck by numerous omissions, alterations of fact, and the romanticizing and softening of descriptions of life on the prairie frontier. Irving's characterizations, in particular, are patently literary; verisimilitude is not his aim.

Irving skillfully evokes the essential loneliness and isolation of the prairie when he describes the breaking of camp and the renewal of the journey:

About ten o'clock, we began our march. I loitered in the rear of the troop as it forded the turbid brook, and defiled through the labyrinths of the forest. I always felt disposed to linger . . . that I might behold the wilderness relapsing into silence and solitude. . . . Trees felled and partly hewn in pieces, and scattered in huge fragments; tentpoles stripped of their covering; smouldering fires, with great morsels of roasted venison and buffalo meat, standing in wooden spits before them . . . In the meantime, a score or two of turkey-buzzards, or vultures, were already on the wing . . . preparing for a descent upon the camp (108).

The great prairie-wilderness, temporarily despoiled by man, quickly resumes its forlorn character.

And Irving does not fail to describe the Indian hunter as a personification of the immense, though quiet, potential of the prairies:

. . . an Indian hunter on a prairie is like a cruiser on the ocean, perfectly independent of the world, and competent to self-protection and self-maintenance. He can cast himself loose from every one, shape his own course, and take care of his own fortunes (17).

The sense of unlimited power is, thus, related to old-fashioned American self-reliance; but in this case it is the Indian who represents absolute independence. Later in the narrative Irving describes a young Osage who was tempted to accompany the Irving party; the Indian, who seriously considered the trip, is contrasted to the enslaved members of civilized society:

Such is the glorious independence of man in a savage state. This youth, with his rifle, his blanket, and his horse, was ready at a moment's warning to rove the world; he carried all his worldly effects with him, and in the absence of artificial wants, possessed the great secret of personal freedom. We of society are slaves, not so much to others as to ourselves; our superfluties are the chains that bind us, impeding every movement of our bodies and thwarting every impulse of our souls (20).

This is, of course, a highly romanticized view of the Indian. It is quite ironic, therefore, to hear Irving--half a dozen pages later--observe, in a matter-of-fact tone, "As far as I can judge, the Indian of poetical fiction is like the shepherd of pastoral romance, a mere personification of imaginary attributes" (27). But as a symbol of freedom and power--in the context of the prairies--the poetical Indian served Irving well.

The sense of wonder and awe pervades many of the excellent descriptions in A Tour on the Prairies. One of the most suggestive of these is the contemplation of the numberless honey-bees which inhabited the prairies:

At present the honey-bee swarms in myriads, in the noble groves and forests which skirt and intersect the prairies, and extend along the alluvial bottoms of the rivers. It seems to me as if these beautiful regions answer literally to the description of the land of promise, "a land flowing with milk and honey"; for the rich pasturage of the prairies is calculated to sustain herds of cattle as countless as the sands upon the seashore, while the flowers with which they are enamelled render them a very paradise for the nectar-seeking bee (30-31).

Irving, with his painter's eye, is not unaware of a religious tint in his observations.

Indeed, a sense of the presence of a supernatural power informs many of the fine descriptive passages of A Tour on the Prairies. In describing a grove of trees that interrupt the prairies, Irving reveals an essentially religious feeling:

We were overshadowed by lofty trees, with straight, smooth trunks, like stately columns; and as the glancing rays of the sun shone through the transparent leaves, tinted with the many-colored hues of Autumn, I was reminded of the effect of sunshine among the stained windows and clustering columns of a Gothic cathedral (25).

Thus, Washington Irving, worldly sophisticate, pays tribute to the vast American prairies.

Of the four nineteenth-century authors that I have chosen to discuss, by far the most important--within the context of the prairie's elicitation of poetic power--is Walt Whitman. Indeed, there is a sense in which Whitman's Leaves of Grass is the apotheosis of the American prairie.

In Leaves of Grass, to put the matter simply, it is the grass which speaks. A contemplation of Whitman's title will clarify this view. Whitman's book of poetry is the Leaves (pages, words, ideas, symbols) of (by, as well as about) Grass (Nature in its largest sense, incarnated in its simplest manifestation--the grass of the prairies). If the grass could speak, what would the grass have to say? Herein lies the genius of our national poet--a book of the grass; the grass, which is without religion, politics, caste, rank, vanity, or prejudice. A force of nature utters it unanswerable and impudent leaves.

It is true, of course, that Walt Whitman never saw the great midwestern American prairies--not, that is, until 1879 after most of his greatest work was already completed. He finally did get briefly as far west as Colorado when he was almost sixty years old. But it was, from the very first, the vast, free, open prairies that symbolized for him the ideals of human existence and endeavor.

In a brief poem composed in his old age, "A Prairie Sunset" (1888), Whitman allegorizes the struggle between art and death as a struggle between light and darkness in a beautiful picture of the loneliness and isolation of the great American prairies:

Shot gold, maroon and violet, dazzling silver,
emerald, fawn,
The earth's whole amplitude and Nature's multiform
power consign'd for once to colors;
The light, the general air possess'd by them--
colors till now unknown,
No limit, confine--not the Western sky alone--
the high meridian--North, South, all,
Pure luminous color fighting the silent shadows
to the last (530-31).

Of course, Walt Whitman is not one to be overcome by the apparent loneliness and isolation; these are simply the background against which the struggle takes place.

The "The Prairie-Grass Dividing" (1860), Whitman provides a magnificent statement of what the vast American prairies symbolized in terms of unlimited human potential--the individuals who were to compose the ideal democracy:

The prairie-grass dividing, its special odor
breathing,
I demand of it the spiritual corresponding,
Demand the most copious and close companionship
of men,
Demand the blades to rise of words, acts, beings,
Those of the open atmosphere, coarse, sunlit,
fresh, nutritious,
Those that go their own gait, erect, stepping with
freedom and command, leading not following,
Those with never-quell'd audacity, those with
sweet and lusty flesh clear of taint,
Those that look carelessly in the faces of
Presidents and governors,
as to say Who are you? (129)

The lack of constraints, symbolized by the prairie

grass, is the sign, thus, of what American citizens should become.

In "The Prairie States" (1880), Whitman elicits wonder and awe not, as is usually the case, by contemplating the wild, untamed prairie grass, but by envisioning the future; the prairie states are

A newer garden of creation, no primal solitude,
Dense, joyous, modern, populous millions,
cities and farms,
With iron interlaced, composite, tied, many
in one,
By all the world contributed--freedom's and law's
and thrift's society,
The crown and teeming paradise, so far, of time's
accumulations,
To justify the past.

The "newer garden" is, of course, the newer Garden of Eden, symbolizing American creativity and productivity--an important aspect of the prairie connotation.

In "Night on the Prairies" (1860), composed long before Walt Whitman ever was anywhere near the prairies, the sense of a divine presence is imagined, as the speaker in the poem reveals his thoughts upon looking out over the prairies at night:

Night on the prairies,
The supper is over, the fire on the ground
burns low,
The wearied emigrants sleep, wrapt in their
blankets;
I walk by myself--I stand and look at the stars,
which I think now I never realized before.
Now I absorb immortality and peace,
I admire death and test propositions (452).

With the supper over, the fire burning low, and sleep now desirable, the poet longingly thinks of an eternal sleep, an immortality suggested by the peace and tranquility of a night on the prairie.

To recapitulate: for the literary imagination of the nineteenth century in America, the vast American prairies had significance chiefly in their power to evoke certain cultural and aesthetic responses. In the four writers, and four texts, which I have cited, we have seen the four dominant thematic treatments of the prairies; namely, their power to suggest loneliness, power, wonder, and spirituality.

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