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Usage Rules

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USAGE RULES

by S. Ray Granade

6/4/2013

As a child, I often violated one of Mark Twain's usage rules. Of course, I didn't know that until much later, when I read his "Fenimore Cooper's Literary Offenses." Almost certainly I violated more of his dicta, but one sticks in my mind.

"Use the right word, not its second cousin" appeared as number thirteen on his list of nineteen "rules of literary art." Twain accused Cooper of violating the rule: "He was not a word-musician. His ear was satisfied with the *approximate* words." Several modern comedians have staked careers on their ability to be "satisfied with approximate words," and thousands of fans have descended into gales of laughter upon their performances. They know better, but pretend otherwise. I knew no better.

My childhood violation of rule thirteen involved indiscriminate reading, architecture, and human anatomy.

The Evergreen Baptist Church, which my father pastored, built a new pastorium when I was in the third grade to replace its first, a single-story white frame house about a half-century old sitting diagonally across the street from the church building. The old one was a glorified double-pen dogtrot with the central run enclosed. Three bedrooms lined up on the left; a parlor, dining room, and kitchen successively occupied the right. One bathroom had grown, like a wart, between the first two bedrooms, with another small bathroom in an enclosed portion of the porch just off the back bedroom. The kitchen formed an extension to the original structure, so the back porch made an ell; another porch stretched across the front and down the right side in a mirroring ell, with the side porch being screened in. The structure sat on piers, with about a four-foot crawl space pretty well open beneath the back porch. The parlor had a fireplace, the bedrooms gas-fed space heaters in addition; the central hallway, separated from parlor and bedrooms by doorways, ended in a set of French doors to the outside but contained some sort of furnace. It was an un-insulated, drafty old house with high ceilings and perpetually cold in winter—even though cold in way South Alabama rarely meant freezing and Christmas was often shirt-sleeve weather. I remember two snows during my childhood: brief events soon devoid of evidence that they had occurred.

Church leaders planned the new pastorium to be everything the old one wasn't. When completed, its siting belied its two stories, for only one rose from the ground. The other contained a full-length concrete-floored basement with concrete block walls, the west-facing portion of which served as a two-car garage. Its superstructure appeared to be a conventional ranch-style brick home with three bedrooms, two baths, living room and dining room, kitchen and den arranged around a double central fireplace and stairs up from the basement that opened into the den. Insulation protected floors and ceilings, and each room was warmed by radiant heat in the ceiling governed by individual switches and controls. Initially it was cooled by a central ceiling fan, but not long after by newly installed central air conditioning. It was modern, it was snug, and it was always comfortable. Visitors came to the front door; most invited guests came up the stairs from the basement, entering through the garage.

My maternal grandmother grew up in southeast Alabama and may or may not have suffered from being cold-natured as a child or young- or median-adult. She'd lived briefly in Washington, D.C., where my mother had been born, but moved to Montgomery before her youngest child arrived and lived there ever after. Whether being cold-natured was a natural or an acquired phenomenon, as far back as I can remember that was one of her attributes.

Mama Ray, as I called her, would have been about sixty when we moved into the new pastorium in 1956. She and my grandfather, Papa Ray, drove down from Montgomery to

Evergreen in their 1950 Oldsmobile until he bought her a new one in 1959. The old one usually sat in the garage when they visited; the new one was too big and bulky to make the sharp turn and fit into the opening, so it always sat in the driveway. They would come up the basement stairs, she in the lead. Invariably, when she walked into the house she would glance to the right at the fireplace. If no fire burned there, she would inevitably ask Daddy “Sam, when are you going to start a fire?” Her husband, my mother, and/or my father would always ask if she were cold; she would always reply in the affirmative.

None of us felt cold, and often it would even be too warm outside for a fire. Usually someone would try to dissuade Mama Ray, but she was a force of nature and as tenacious as a snapping turtle. Daddy might temporize, and he might delay, but he would always wind up laying and lighting a fire, for we always had firewood and kindling. Fireplaces might be terribly inefficient heat sources, but once he started a fire the small den heated up quickly and before long became unbearable.

When hearing the Biblical story of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the fiery furnace, I always thought of her. The three were bound fully dressed, including their hats, and cast into an overheated furnace, a furnace so hot that those throwing in the youths died from the heat. Yet when King Nebuchadnezzar asked his courtiers “Did we not cast three men bound into the fire?” and got an affirmative answer, he responded “But I see four men unbound, walking in the midst of the fire, and they are not hurt...” He called them forth, and the whole court “saw that the fire had not had any power over the bodies of those men. The hair of their heads was not singed, their cloaks were not harmed, and no smell of fire had come upon them.” At least the connotation was religious and far removed from the other, passing fancy that sometimes reared its head: that somehow or other Mama Ray was kin to fire salamanders, which I’d read of emerging from the flames unharmed.

As a child, I puzzled and puzzled over my grandmother’s affection for fires and her body’s seeming obliviousness, and perhaps imperviousness, to their effect. One day my curiosity got the best of me and I sidled up to my mother. Mother had always encouraged my intellectual curiosity, a trait we shared, and just as she never told me that I couldn’t do something because my daddy was a pastor, so she never said that I shouldn’t ask about anything. Emboldened by that long experience, I blurted out “Mother, why is Mama Ray so cold-blooded?”

I learned that day the difference between cold-blooded and cold-natured. And when, in graduate school, I read Mark Twain’s demolition of Cooper’s writing and first encountered those rules, I remembered my childhood question and the important difference between the right word and its second cousin.