THE CRATER. OR, VULCAN'S PEAK. A TALE OF THE PACIFIC

James Fenimore Cooper

Analysis by Marzia Dati

Dystopian Novel

James Fenimore Cooper’s *The Crater; or Vulcan’s Peak* is a dystopian novel published in 1847. The narrative blends romantic adventure with apocalyptic themes, shifting the trope of the American frontier to the Pacific Ocean. The story follows Mark Woolston, a sailor turned colonizer, as he builds a utopian society on volcanic islands, evoking U.S. expansionist and moral ideals. Drawing on contemporary geological knowledge, the novel juxtaposes spiritual beliefs and human ambition.

Year of Publication	1847
Publication Place	New York
Editor	D. Appleton and Company

GEOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

Volcano

LITERARY EVENT

Time	Unspecified
Location	Pacific Pacific Ocean
Volcano Name	The Crater
Base/Complex	Rancocus Island
Volcanic Risk Ref.	Referenced

Typology	Terrestrial
Volcano/Eruption Typology	Terrestrial

Anthropization Level	Sea Coast

INDIVIDUAL REACTIONS & AFFECTS

Attitudes

Name	Mark Woolston
Age	Nearly 20
Gender	Male
Native Place	Bristol Pennsylvania
Nationality	North American
Reactions	Acceptance, Anxiety, Prayer, Adaptation, Curiosity

COLLECTIVE REACTIONS & AFFECTS

Attitudes

Name	Men
Reactions	Adaptation, Anxiety, Acceptance, Prayer, Curiosity

LINGUISTIC & STYLISTIC ANALYSIS

Keywords	Extinct Volcano, Crater, Lava, Ashes, Debris, Cavity, Cone, Geological Formation, Guano, Crust,Reeff
Metaphors	Garden of Eden
Motifs, Topoi, Mythologemes	Locus Amoenus, Colonised People, Colonisers
Syntax	Hypotaxis, Complex Verbal Phrases, High Frequency Connectives
Punctuation	No Peculiarities, Multiple Exl
Morphology	Preference For Nouns Adjectives
Phonetics/Prosody	Sound-related word choice (onomatopoeia, rhyme, alliteration)

The Crater; or Vulcan's Peak. A Tale of the Pacific. (Mark's Reef) (1847) is one of the lesser-known works by the North-American writer James Fenimore Cooper. In this novel, in which elements of the political fable merge with modes, motifs and *topoi* pertaining to dystopian fiction, Cooper combines elements of romanticism and realism to portray the struggles and triumphs of "sea" pioneers in a hostile environment and in the oceanic wilderness.

As in Cooper's previous works, he focuses on the exploration and expansion of the American frontier, which, in this case, involves the establishment of new settlements in the Pacific Ocean. Though at its early stage, this process parallels the westward expansion in the territories of North America. The exploration of the Pacific was part of the American civilising mission, which – infused with religious and sociopolitical ideals – aimed to spread Christianity and democracy even to the Pacific. Not only did the Pacific frontier represent a threshold to cross in terms of colonial expansion, but it was also a place of social and cultural interaction, where different cultures and systems of powers could confront and negotiate their meanings and values.

In the novel, Cooper clearly refers to the expansion of North American trade to Asia across the Pacific: "the commerce of America, in 1793, was already flourishing, and Philadelphia [the main character's native town] was then much the most important place in the country. Its East India trade, in particular, was the very large and growing, and Doctor Woolston knew that fortunes were rapidly made by many engaged in it." (15). As emerges in this excerpt, the American frontier in the Pacific was a continuation of the westward expansionist impulse, triggered by economic goals such as commercial profits, the conquest of new markets, and the acquisition of new territories. From a global, political perspective, this further expansion led to the encounter with different cultures, leaving a lasting impact on both the United States and the Pacific region. Indeed, as Jason Berger puts it, "*The Crater* is published at the onset of one of Cooper's final political alignments (where he moves from early Federalist sympathies into a DeWitt Clinton brand of Republicanism, an embrace of the Democratic Party, and here, in the 1840s, toward a rather bitter and disillusioned political perspective)." (2010). Starting from these premises, we can state that *The Crater* – which clearly reflects Cooper's political ideas and anxiety – may be referred to as a dystopian novel. Furthermore, it can also be included within the American Apocalyptic tradition as Matthew Wynn Sivils argues in "Environmental Apocalypse and The Crater".

As regards the story, it centres around a crater on an unidentified, and apparently uninhabited Pacific Island. The crater the two castaways Mark Woolston and Bob Betts come across on the islands described as "a regular circular mound" (56), "smooth and perpendicular" (68), and as "an extinct crater of a volcano" (68). They also discover an active volcano on a nearby island but they are completely unaware of the potential volcanic risk. Cooper does not use the word archipelago, but the reader can infer that the setting consists in a group of islands.

The plot is rather complex: Mark Woolston, born in Philadelphia and destined to be a Bachelor of Art at Princeton University. However, after seeing a ship docked at the wharf of Burlington, he changes his mind, and decides to become a seaman. After several voyages, he embarks on the merchant ship *Rancocous* heading to unidentified Pacific islands to collect sandal wood, which he intends to sell in Canton in exchange for tea. After quitting Valparaiso, the *Rancocus* is driven upon over a reef in such a way that it lies virtually imprisoned – but not much damaged – inside a circle of rocks. The two survivors, Mark and Bob Betts, discover not far away a barren, rocky island, which they reach by sailing the ship's dinghy through a narrow, perilous channel leading them to a small, sheltered bay where they discover the "crater" of an extinct volcano. They finally are able to extricate the Rancocus from its trap, and, after placing buoys at the most dangerous points, they safely navigate the vessel through the narrow channel into the bay. Later, a miraculous land-birthing earthquake allows Mark to begin exploring and naming the territory where he has landed. Gradually, Mark turns himself into a colonist by populating the "new colony" with men and women coming from America. Then, he finds out that the islands around the crater are populated by Indigenous people, and soon the inevitable clashes between colonizers and natives occur. As the colony develops, Mark is appointed as the Governor of the island. Even though he manages to keep close control over the social construction of his new territory, its growth remains unchecked. On a semantic level, the foundation of the colony is marked by the change of the language Cooper uses to highlight the dichotomies 'colonizers vs colonized' and 'Americans vs natives. he expansion of the colony effects significant changes, where Mark loses both political and social influence, and Cooper most directly lays out his harsh social critique. At the end of the novel, Nature intervenes by reminding man of his finitude and of the precariousness of any Empire on earth. After a voyage to Philadelphia, the *Rancocus* comes back to the colony, where a violent earthquake has destroyed everything.

On a narrative level, the novel presents a hypotactic structure: Cooper makes use of complex sentences with multiple subordinate clauses to add depth and complexity to storytelling by exploring connections and dependencies between different elements of the plot, character development, and themes. The narration is interspersed with digressions which give detailed information about animals and vegetation on the Pacific islands. Such descriptions do not interrupt the flow of the narration; on the contrary, they stir the nineteenth-century reader's imagination about unknown territories in the Pacific. The novel is divided into thirty chapters. On a structural level, each chapter is introduced by an epigraph taken from both North American and British literary sources.

In the first part of the novel, Mark is often compared to Robinson Crusoe: in the very beginning, in fact, he falls a prey to despair due to the barren landscape which opens up in front of his eyes: "nakedness and dreariness were the two words which best described that island; the only interruption to its solitude and desolation being occasioned by the birds, which now came screaming and flying above the heads of the intruders, showing, both by the their boldness and their cries, that they were totally unacquainted with men" (67). However, supported by his trust in Divine Providence, Mark later reads the presence of the crater and the occurrence natural disasters – eruptions and earthquakes – as acts of God. Mark realises that the crater provides fertile land where he can sow the seeds kept in the *Rancocus*'s cargo hold and breed the animals that survived the shipwreck. Therefore, the crater acquires a positive significance as it provides food and shelter for Mark.

The description of active volcanoes and seismic collateral events in the novel triggers the readers' curiosity about what Cooper actually knew about active volcanoes in the Pacific Ocean in the nineteenth century. Seven years before he wrote *The Crater*, the eruption of the volcano Kīlauea sparked great interest in North America, particularly through the accounts of the U.S. Exploring Expedition led by Captain Charles Wilkes, which included geologist James D. Dana. Kīlauea is an active shield volcano, located along the southeastern shore of Hawaii Island. News and accounts of the 1840 eruption reached the United States, and they were widely discussed in North-American magazines such as in *The article Great Eruption of the volcano of Kilauea*, where the North-American Christian missionary, Titus Coan, who wrote books about eruptions of the Kilauea volcano, earthquakes, and tsunamis, describes the 1840 eruption as a destructive one, with lava flows and significant changes to the loandascape. by However, there is no direct evidence that James Fenimore Cooper specifically commented on the 1840 Kilauea eruption, but it is plausible that he was aware of it through the reports and accounts circulating in the United States. The volcanic eruption described in *The Crater* parallels that of Kīlauea. The eruption was known for its intense lava fountains and flows, which were visible for miles, it extended the coastline in some areas and added new land to the island. According to W.B. Gates, "For *The Crater; or, Vulcan's Peak* (1847), James Fenimore Cooper drew most of the material dealing with the islands of the Pacific from *The Voyages of Captain James Cook* and Lieutenant Charles Wilkes's *Narrative of the United States Exploring Expedition*". In his essay, *Cooper's Crater and the two Explorers* Gates illuminates the specific passage which Cooper might have drawn from both Cook and Wilkies. There are many references to James Cook, in particular in the first part of the novel, which confirm that Cooper may have had Cook's voyage in mind as he clearly states: "In the year 1796 the Pacific Ocean was by no means as familiar to navigators as it is today. Cooke (sic) had made his celebrated voyage less than twenty years before the world; but even Cooke left a great deal to be ascertained, more especially in the way of details (38). The first geologic study of the Hawaiian Islands was carried between 1840-1841, as a part of the U.S. Exploring Expedition commanded by Lieutenant Charles Wilkes. The geological expedition was directed by James Dwight Dana. The North American geologist Dana had studied Vesuvius, and the results of his research on volcanos *Characteristics of Volcanoes* was published in 1890. In the expedition, Dana and his colleagues recognized that the islands become increasingly younger from northwest to southeast along the Hawaiian volcanic chain, due to the differences in their degree of erosion. Dana's "great fissure" origin for the islands played a very important role, and can be considered a prominent working hypothesis for many subsequent studies until the mid-20th century. The seminal work of Dana resulted in greatly increased awareness of the Hawaiian volcanoes, which continue to attract much scientific investigation.

In the novel, the discovery of the crater is described in detail. It is Mark that "at once recognized [that singular elevation] to be the extinct crater of a volcano […] The mound or barrier of lava and scories that composed the outer wall of this crater, was in most places, absolutely circular" (68). The passage

that Mark finds “had, no doubt, been formed by the exit of lava, which centuries ago, had doubtless broken through at this point, and contributed to form the visible reef beyond” (68). At the beginning of chapter five Cooper gives even more details which implicitly refer to geological research he had read:

Mark now began to comprehend the character of the singular geological formation, into the midst of which the Rancocus had been led, as it might almost be by the hand of Providence itself. He was at that moment seated on the topmost pinnacle of a submarine mountain of volcanic origin—submarine as to all its elevations, heights and spaces, with the exception of the crater where he had just taken his stand, and the little bit of visible and venerable lava, by which it was surrounded. It is true that this lava rose very near the surface of the ocean, in fifty places that he could see at no great distance [..]. (70)

Another seismic event is described in Chapter XI: an earthquake is anticipated by tangible changes in the atmosphere which have a strong physical impact on him. Mark feels a sense of suffocation and believes that the *Rancocus* is caught by fire; as soon as he reaches the deck of the ship, he realizes that it is trembling and hears a “rushing of water” as a flood was about to start: “Hissing sounds were heard, and streams of fires and gleams of lurid light were seen in the air. He had felt the shock of an earthquake, and the volcano [a new one] had suddenly becomes active” (173). The type of eruption which Cooper describes here is an explosive eruption followed by a pyroclastic flow with a release of steam and volcanic gases, and launching rock and ash into the air. However, what is more important is that the earthquake and the eruption have changed the landscape: “Naked rocks appeared in places where Mark was certain water in abundance had existed a few hours before. The sea-wall, directly ahead of the ship, and which never showed itself above the surface more than two or three inches, in any part of it, and that only at exceedingly neap tides, was now not only bare for a long distance, but parts rose ten and fifteen feet above the surrounding sea” (174). A sudden elevation of the earth’s crust occurred and a part of the surrounding sea was converted into rocks and at the centre of that creation a new island has formed. The most interesting fact in this passage is the reference to geological studies of his time:

Geology was a science that had not made its present progress in the day of Mark Woolston, but his education had been too good to leave him totally without a theory for what had happened. He supposed that the internal fires had produced so much gas, just beneath this spot, as to open crevices at the bottom of the ocean, through which water had flowed in sufficient quantities to create a vast body of steam, which steam had been the immediate agent of lifting so much of the rock and land, and of causing the earthquake (176).

What emerges here is the juxtaposition between the Crater and the volcano: the former is a source of life, rich in vegetation, which provides Mark with food and shelter, “a garden of Eden, before woman was given to him for a companion” (223), the latter highlights the destructive force of nature in front of which man is not but powerless; the ambivalence (of) nature vs man, creation vs destruction run(s) throughout the novel.

Cooper also describes the excursion to the active volcano, which informs the reader that it has to do with a volcanic cone: “[it] was itself a circular and very regular mountain, of some six or eight hundred feet in height, with a foundation of dry rock and lava, that might have contained a thousand acres. Everything seemed solid and permanent; and our mariners were of opinion there was very little danger of this formation ever disappearing below the surface of the sea again. […] that the island might become a scene of fertility and loveliness, in the course of ages, like so many others of volcanic origin in that quarter of the world, was probable” (256).

The destructive force of nature fully unfolds in the last part of the novel, where it is personified: the volcano turns into an evil power that destroys what man has built. After a voyage to Philadelphia, the *Rancocus* comes back to the “colony” and Mark finds out that a “dire catastrophe” has happened, an earthquake had swallowed the islands into the sea: “The reminder of his paradise had sunk beneath the ocean! Internal fires had wrought a new convulsion, and the labours and hopes of years had vanished in a moment. The crust of the earth had again been broken; and this time it was to *destroy*, instead of to *create* (italics mine)” (490).

Cooper utilizes the crater, the volcano and earthquakes as a warning against the transience of temporal power, as metaphors of human finitude; it is not by chance that he quotes Thomas Cole's series of paintings *The Course of Empire which includes The Savage State, The Arcadian or Pastoral State, The Consummation of Empire, Destruction and Desolation* (1833-1836):

> The lead gave fearful confirmation of the nature of the disaster, the soundings answering accurately to the known formation of the land in the neighbourhood of the Peak […] But, in the Peak itself, it was not possible to be mistaken: there it was in its familiar outline, just as it had stood in its more elevated position, when it crowned its charming mountain, and overlooked the whole of that enchanting plain which had so lately stretched beneath. It might be said to resemble, in this respect, that sublime rock, which is recognised as a part of the "everlasting hills," in Cole's series of noble landscapes that is called "the March of Empire;" ever the same amid the changes of time, and civilization, and decay, there it was the apex of the Peak; naked, storm-beaten, and familiar to the eye, though surrounded no longer by the many delightful objects which had once been seen in its neighbourhood (491).

In conclusion, a more careful reading of the novel reveals that another warning emerges clearly: the unpredictability of nature and how it has been shaping human life. Finally, *The Crater* paves the way to further reflections on the influence of West European economies and cultures on ecosystems in the territories where Europeans have expanded over the past five hundred years.

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